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RESPONDING TO RESTRUCTURING

**The geography of trade union responses to the
restructuring of local government services in
Britain, 1979-89**

Joseph Matthew Painter, BA

Thesis submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy of the Open University
in the Discipline of Geography

September 1991

Date of submission: 05.09.91.

Date of award: 26.11.91.

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Abstract

This thesis considers the development of policies and practices by trade unions and their members in response to changes in the way services are provided by British local authorities. The research was conducted in the context of debates about the changing fortunes of the trade union movement, and these are outlined. The particular set of practices associated with public service trade unionism in the 1970s developed during the emergence of the crisis of the 'Fordist mode of regulation'. Drawing on the French regulation school of political economy the study discusses the characteristics of the 'neo-liberal' path to post-Fordism adopted by the British government during the 1980s, and its implications for local government trade unions and local government services. Trade union responses to the policies which constitute this path are examined at both the national and local level, in the latter case through four detailed case studies of Newcastle, Manchester, Wandsworth and Milton Keynes. The nature of the trade unions' response in each case is considered in terms of the idea of overlapping networks of 'locales' or settings for action, and the resulting uneven geographical development of new forms of trade union action is highlighted. The concept of 'locale' emphasises the way in which aspects of settings form part of the resources of action itself. Through a discussion of the work of David Harvey, this is considered further in an examination of the ways in which 'place' and 'community' can be sources of radicalism for the trade unions. The study concludes with a consideration of the implications of the geographical constitution and geographical expression of trade union action for the transition from the Fordist mode of regulation.

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Acknowledgements

This study would not have been possible without the help and cooperation of the many trade unionists, local councillors, local authority officers and campaign workers who gave me their time and shared their knowledge with me. In order to protect their anonymity I am unable to mention them by name but they all have my grateful thanks. Among the many others who contributed in one way or another I would like to thank: my supervisors, John Allen and Doreen Massey, for their patience, encouragement and constructive criticism throughout the project; Steve Percy and Harriet Lamb in Newcastle and Professor and Mrs Dyson in Manchester for accommodation; Rachel Woodward for her support; and Lowri Daniels, Steve Hinshelwood and Adam Salkeld for the Guinness. Finally, I would like to thank the Open University for the Research Studentship which paid for it all.

Introduction

Focus

British trade unions and trade unionists were on the receiving end of a large number of political, economic and ideological assaults during the 1980s. While the trends have not always been in one direction the majority of them seem to have worked against the organisations of labour. Union membership, economic power and political influence all seem to have been eroded. However, the esteem in which unions have been held by the public has steadily increased.¹ The causes and consequences of many of these changes have been widely debated by academics, politicians and journalists. By contrast, rather less attention has been paid to the responses of trade unions themselves to the developments.

This is unfortunate for three reasons. Firstly, it understates the degree to which economic and political change is actively contested (or supported) by the groups affected by it. Secondly, it gives the impression that organisations such as trade unions are simply at the mercy of wider processes of structural social change over which they have no control.² Thirdly, it can lead to an inadequate understanding of the ways in which institutions actually operate by, for example, underpinning a functionalist interpretation of social phenomena in which changes in institutions are the result of the 'needs' of some wider system.

In this study, therefore, I propose to examine the ways in which trade unions and their members actively respond to, and intervene in, some of the processes which affect them. The key questions which my research seeks to answer, therefore, are: (i) *how* do trade unions respond to change? and (ii) *why* do they

¹Edwards PK and Bain GS (1988) 'Why are trade unions becoming more popular? Unions and public opinion in Britain' *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 26:3 pp311-326.

²The policies associated in the British labour movement with 'new realism' might be seen as the political consequence of this process.

2 *Responding to restructuring*

respond as they do?

Complete answers to both of these questions are clearly beyond the scope of a single research project. I have therefore limited my enquiries to a case study of one sector: local government services. This focus was selected for specific reasons and these are detailed in Appendix A. Moreover, with hindsight and as I shall demonstrate below, my research showed that this particular sector was a particularly apposite choice by virtue both of its significant role in current processes of social change and of its status as an important site for the production, reproduction and transformation of contemporary practices of trade unionism. Furthermore these twin virtues, I will suggest, are closely interrelated.

Trade union responses to processes which affect them take various forms. Two broad categories might be identified: policy and practice. These categories do commonly appear in both academic and popular discourse, although frequently in rather misleading ways. For example, the formulation and communication of policy is seen as the province of national union leaderships. Furthermore, it is often asserted that during the 1980s these policies have been ineffective. Thus the Trades Union Congress (TUC) conscientiously prepares a policy statement each year prior to the publication of the Government's budget with no sign that its contents have any influence over Government policy. Such apparently ineffective policies can of course achieve other objectives such as agenda-setting and the publication of alternatives. By contrast, trade union practice is frequently associated with the 'grass-roots' and identified almost exclusively with industrial action in general and strike activity in particular.

These assumptions about the respective spheres of operation of policy formulation and practical activity are inadequate. For instance, national union organisations are involved in practice through their involvement in collective bargaining with employers' organisations while at the local level trade unions do engage in policy formulation, though this may be in conflict with and/or formally

subordinate to national union policy.³ In addition, union policies are not always ineffective and union practices are not limited to industrial action. In particular, where union policies are able to be implemented directly by union organisations and their members they may well have important effects and examples of this will be described in this study. And union practices include a wide range of activities besides striking, including recruitment, training and education, negotiation, campaigning, formal (party) politics, cultural and social activities and membership services such as legal advice and welfare programmes.

Throughout this study I will thus be concerned with the relationships between policy and practice at these different levels. I will show how at certain times practice first leads, and then becomes partially constitutive of, policies which in turn feed back into the further development of practice in sometimes supportive and sometimes contradictory ways. Furthermore this can also happen between different levels in the union organisations with local practices sometimes informing national policies and thereby being replicated in amended form elsewhere.

Moreover, as I stated above, my aim here is not merely to characterise and describe union responses, important though that is, but also to try to explain why unions and their members respond as they do. In doing so I will argue that an adequate explanation involves locating the formulation of policy and the social practices of trade unionism in their respective contexts in space and time. The importance of geographical context in the explanation of social phenomena is an increasingly prominent feature of writing in the social sciences (and not only in the work of human geographers). I believe that my research shows that a sensitivity to space, place and geographical context is crucial to explaining why trade union

³In addition trade unions vary as to the relationship between national and local policy. In the National and Local Government Officers' Association (NALGO) for example, a decentralised decision-making system gives considerable autonomy to local branches. The National Union of Public Employees (NUPE), by contrast, is more centralised, although it should immediately be noted that such relative centralisation does not preclude the participation of lay members in both the formulation and implementation of policy.

responses to change in local government service provision have taken the forms, and had the effects, that they have.

In this perspective the distinctions which I have drawn between different levels in the bureaucracies of trade unions and the stress I have placed on the social and political practices of trade unionism constitute not a merely useful typology of union organisation and activity but an interpretation, following Andrew Sayer,⁴ of the relations between *real* objects and structures. In other words there is a real distinction to be made between the nature of national union organisations and that of local branches and between union policies and the practices of trade unionism. Further, I believe that these real distinctions arise (at least in part) from the structuring of social relations over space and through time. If I am right in this, and much of what follows will seek to substantiate my claims, the geography of trade unionism is not incidental and contingent, but essential and necessary, to its nature.

Before introducing a number of wider aims which provide the political and academic purposes of this study I want to situate my work in its context. In addition to establishing the grounds for these purposes, this context helps to clarify how the specific focus outlined here holds wider significance for the changing nature of trade unionism in Britain.

Context

There are two sorts of context on which I wish to focus and these are related to each other. The first is the academic context: the other texts which have influenced this study, the debates from which it derives and to which it seeks to contribute and its disciplinary background. The second is what might be termed the political context. All academic texts have some political significance whether this is explicit or not. However I want in addition to go beyond this and deliberately situate this

⁴Sayer A (1984) *Method in social science: a realist approach* (London: Hutchinson).

study in two aspects of a broader political setting.

The first of these is relatively straightforward and stems from the fact that the focus of the study is political processes and events. This 'empirical context' (changes in the form and function of the state, changes in the relationship between the Government and the trade unions and so on) sometimes falls within my area of study, sometimes forms part of the explanations for processes studied and is occasionally cited as 'scene-setting' material. There should not, I think, be much controversy here. The second aspect is more difficult and consists in the political debates in which this study is an intervention, whether intentional or not. In one sense this is merely the academic context expressed in different terms. However it is not enough to clarify only the explicit academic context. Much academic writing fails to recognise or reflect on the political conditions and political consequences of its production. Frequently the political import of academic writing remains as a 'sub-text', implicit and unacknowledged, at least by the author. The intention of this section is not to attempt to render my text transparent, and thereby to impose *authority*, since that is impossible and, given the role that anonymous others have played in its construction, inappropriate. Rather I want to acknowledge what I can of my political motives, thereby to disinter a part of the 'sub-text' for inspection and thus to try to avoid the disingenuousness inherent in attempts to produce value-free social scientific knowledge.⁵

Academic

The academic context will, I think, become clear in following chapters. In brief, however, there is a number of academic literatures which are of particular importance. These are work on trade unions and industrial relations, work on local government and the state, work on the relationship between geography and social change and attempts to interpret theoretically the nature of economic, social and

⁵I recognise that much of the sub-text is happily beyond my powers of discovery. This study is not an exercise in self-psychoanalysis.

political 'restructuring'. In some cases texts which were important in the development of the research project and its execution will not play a significant role in this account of that project. This is sometimes because they became redundant (perhaps where a particular path of empirical enquiry proved unsuccessful) and sometimes because they had use at a particular stage of the research (research design, for example) but were superseded by other texts in subsequent stages.⁶ Thus the activity of interpreting research findings is qualitatively different from that of designing research projects and the texts constructed in each case are necessarily different from each other.

Trade unions and industrial relations

Existing research on trade unionism and industrial relations is very wide-ranging, and is conducted from a variety of methodological and theoretical viewpoints. Much research is conducted from a critical and radical perspective and often, though not always, adopts innovative techniques. The writing of Huw Beynon on Ford car workers,⁷ of Cynthia Cockburn on the printing industry⁸ and of Hilary Wainwright and Dave Elliott on trade unionism in Lucas Aerospace⁹ are examples where forms of action research, participant observation and long interviewing were used in the research process. Similar commitment and a rather different methodology inform the work of John Kelly,¹⁰ who eschews the detailed case study for a national-level analysis and develops a sort of empiricist Marxism in which, for example, he tries to 'measure' class-consciousness and correlate it

⁶For example during the design of the research project I considered in some detail the nature of ideology. This study does not contain a detailed account of that consideration, and thus makes little reference to the texts involved, but some of my interpretations do depend in part on the particular understanding of ideology which I developed at that time. Likewise the work of Scott Lash and John Urry was crucial in developing the focus of the project but does not appear in detail in the final study. (Lash S and Urry J (1987) *The end of organized capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity).)

⁷Beynon H (1984, first edition 1973) *Working for Ford* (Harmondsworth: Pelican).

⁸Cockburn C (1983) *Brothers: male dominance and technological change* (London: Pluto).

⁹Wainwright H and Elliott D (1982) *The Lucas Plan: a new trade unionism in the making?* (London: Allison and Busby).

¹⁰Kelly J (1988) *Trade unions and socialist politics* (London: Verso).

through time with levels of industrial militancy.¹¹

Other writing on industrial relations is less explicit in its politics and while focussing (like Beynon, Cockburn, Wainwright and Elliott) on the workplace level is not limited to individual case studies and aspires to general statements about the changing nature of trade unionism in Britain. Important examples are the writings of Philip Bassett and John MacInnes of which I will have much more to say in Chapter One.

Apart from 'reference' works like Henry Pelling's history of the British labour movement, Ken Coates' and Tony Topham's text on *Trade unions in Britain*, the Workplace Industrial Relations Survey and statistical material from journals such as *Employment Gazette* the other main areas of literature in the industrial relations field is that relating to organisational analysis. This literature has been of only very limited concern to this project. Organisational theory tends to reduce management-labour relations to a series of technical problems which are divorced from the real social and political content of trade unionism. Again following Sayer, I wish to suggest that the social and political content is not a contingent 'added extra' but is inherent in the nature of trade unionism. Any analysis which abstracts from it (as much organisational theory seems to do) can by definition only produce severely compromised explanations.¹²

This dry bibliographic sketch does not, however, clarify the real significance for this study of the literature on trade unions and industrial relations. The key contextual literature is that which attempts to assess the implications of economic and political change for the structures and practices of trade unionism. In particular there has been a controversial debate over the significance of certain well publicised shifts in economic structures (such as that from manufacturing to service employment), developments in working practices (such as those associated with

¹¹*Ibid.* pp86-101.

¹²Robbins S P (1987) *Organization theory: structure, design, and applications* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall).

so-called Japanese methods), and changes in the legislative environment (such as the outlawing of solidarity ('secondary') industrial action). While some writers have identified these changes as widespread or fundamental or both, others have argued that they are limited and superficial. The importance of this for trade unions is that different interpretations of these processes can be used to legitimate very different political strategies. Put crudely, if the changes are dramatic and permanent then very different forms of trade unionism might be called for, whereas if they are of only passing significance then trade unions may be able to weather the storm and emerge from the other side little changed.

Expressing the alternatives this starkly deliberately caricatures the debate, and it will become clear in what follows that it is rather more sophisticated than this. However, one potential flaw in both these positions is immediately apparent: they both appear to assume that what trade unions were doing before the changes came along *was* appropriate to that time. While I do not wish to suggest that trade unionism prior to the 1980s was manifestly *inappropriate* in form and function, I will argue that a critical analysis of the period is vital to understanding why and how trade unions have changed since.

Local government and the local state

My choice of case study requires that I consider also the extensive literature on the local government system in Britain and debates over the appropriate ways in which to theorise its changing nature. Like trade unionism, local government has been one of the key political battlegrounds in Britain during the 1980s. After a period of strong expansion during the early 1970s, local government services and employment have faced a succession of increasingly severe restrictions on spending levels and political autonomy.

The general textbook produced by Gerry Stoker provides an obvious starting place, and has the virtue of placing the local government system in Britain in its

broader political context.¹³ It represents therefore, a considerable improvement on another tradition of research which I will call the public administration tradition. As with organisational theorists in the field of management-labour relations, writers from a public administration perspective tend to adopt a technocratic and de-politicised view of the provision of local government services, often allied to a series of liberal-pluralist assumptions about the nature of politics in late capitalist Britain. This work, whilst occasionally able to provide useful descriptive material, is of only very limited analytical significance and does not require detailed consideration.

From more critical perspectives much research has revolved around the question of the relationship between local and central government. A seminal contribution from Cynthia Cockburn set the terms of the debate for some years.¹⁴ Cockburn's study of local government in Lambeth in South London convinced her that the institutions of local government were, in essence, agencies of the central state. The autonomy enjoyed by local government is largely illusory, argued Cockburn, and its *raison d'être* is provided by the functions it fulfils for processes of capital accumulation and the reproduction of the capitalist system.

Cockburn's view was challenged by the work of Peter Saunders. Saunders has somewhat modified his original argument, but again it was an important marker in the debate.¹⁵ Briefly, Saunders suggested that, rather than the local state being effectively subsumed within the wider structures of the state as a whole, it was possible to discern two relatively discrete spheres of influence, those of production on the one hand and consumption on the other. The sphere of production, argued Saunders, was the responsibility of the central state, while the sphere of consumption was the responsibility of local state institutions. This 'dual state thesis' has been extensively criticised. Probably its most important shortcoming is

¹³Stoker G (1988) *The politics of local government* (London: Macmillan).

¹⁴Cockburn C (1977) *The local state* (London: Pluto).

¹⁵Saunders P (1979) *Urban Politics: a sociological interpretation* (London: Hutchinson).

that it relies on a rigid division of political labour between different scales of state organisations which is not always present in practice. There are many ways in which local-level organisations are involved in 'production' (through infrastructural provision, for example) while central government is responsible for a variety of 'consumption' functions, such as social security.

Although adopting different positions, Cockburn's and Saunders' writings are both in part reactions to an earlier tradition of research into local politics. Urban managerialism focussed on the activities of 'urban managers' (local government officials and others) in controlling access to scarce resources, such as housing.¹⁶ Subsequent work criticised this sort of research in part for failing to situate the managers in a wider political and economic context which might clarify *why* such resources were scarce. However, urban managerialism did have the virtue of considering the internal operation of local politics and attempting to 'unpack' the 'black box' of political and administrative decision making. This is significant for my research since it is only by considering what goes on *within* local government that the causes and consequences of particular trade union responses to change can be identified.

More recently attempts have been made to revive this focus of research, but in ways which link it more explicitly to the wider context charted by Cockburn and Saunders. Work from this perspective is a key context for my research, which tries explicitly to relate developments in industrial relations within local authorities to wider shifts in the political and economic geography of Britain.

The essays on local socialism edited by Martin Boddy and Colin Fudge exemplify one aspect of this revival, which focuses on the operation of policies developed by local authorities in response to industrial decline and challenges from central government.¹⁷ A similarly critical perspective prompts Alan Clarke and

¹⁶Rex J and Moore R (1967) *Race, community and conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)

¹⁷Boddy M and Fudge C (1984) *Local socialism* (London: Macmillan).

Allan Cochrane to expose the operation of the local government 'machine' by focussing on the key role of a particular local authority officer, the treasurer, in the success or failure of attempts to resist pressure from central government.¹⁸

Other writers have tried to tie in very directly the changing working practices of local authorities to both political conflicts in the local state and more general processes of social and economic change.¹⁹ This work has the virtue from my point of view of addressing the issue of the ways in which local services are actually produced, although, as I have argued elsewhere,²⁰ there are clear dangers in drawing too easy analogies between processes of change at the micro- and macro-levels.

Another advantage of research which dissects the mechanisms of local government is that it can clarify in part why local state policy varies from place to place. As I shall suggest in more detail in subsequent chapters, understanding the geography of trade union responses cannot be separated from the analysis of their genesis and effects. A crucial component of that geography is the uneven pattern of local policies and local government service provision with which the unions nationally are faced. The work of Simon Duncan and Mark Goodwin focuses specifically on the causes of such variation.²¹ They argue that policy variation is the result of local state institutions interacting with different sets of social processes in different places. Furthermore, the fact that social processes are different in different places is a consequence of their uneven development through time and

¹⁸Clarke A and Cochrane A (1989) 'Inside the machine' *Capital and Class* 37 pp35-61.

¹⁹Geddes M (1988) 'The capitalist state and the local economy: "restructuring for labour" and beyond' *Capital and Class* 35 pp85-120; Hoggett P 1987 'A farewell to mass production? Decentralisation as an emergent private and public sector paradigm' in Hoggett P and Hambleton R (eds) *Decentralisation and democracy: localising public services* (Bristol: School of Advanced Urban Studies) pp215-232; Stoker G (1989) 'Creating a local government for a post-Fordist society: the Thatcherite project?' in Stewart J and Stoker G (eds) *The future of local government* (London: Macmillan) pp141-170.

²⁰Painter J (1991) 'Regulation theory and local government' *Local Government Studies* 17:6 (in press).

²¹Duncan S and Goodwin M (1988) *The local state and uneven development: behind the local government crisis* (Cambridge: Polity).

across space.

While I will not be following their explanatory method precisely, it represents an important context for this study since it draws on debates concerning the relationship between space, place and social relations. I will have a considerable amount to say about these relationships, particularly in Chapter Six below, but it is useful here to summarise the academic context of this aspect of my research.

Geography and social change

Among the vast literature in this field I have drawn on a number of specific debates which deal with the ways in which the characteristics of particular places are produced and the subsequent effects that they have on social life within and beyond the local area. In the mid-1980s a major research programme initiated by Doreen Massey and funded by the ESRC aimed to examine how and why processes of economic restructuring had different outcomes in different places. The process of interpreting the empirical results of the Changing Urban and Regional Systems (CURS) initiative led to a considerable debate about the role of space and place in explanations of social change.²² Although the 'locality debate', as it became known, failed to produce a consensus on this issue, it is an important context from which I will draw and against which I will set my own interpretations of geographical variations in trade union policy.

I will suggest, however, that the locality debate (at its present level of development and in the specific circumstances of my research) provides only some of the resources required for an adequate explanation. Specifically I will argue that it does not address an issue of considerable importance in this study, namely the links between individual and group actions and the geographical settings in which those actions occur.²³ I will therefore draw also to a limited extent on the work of

²²Although as Massey has pointed out that was not necessarily the intention. Massey D (1991) 'The political place of locality studies' *Environment and Planning A* 23:2 pp267-281.

²³This is not necessarily a criticism of 'locality research', which is usually concerned with a slightly different set of issues.

Anthony Giddens, and in particular on his schematic discussion of the concept of 'locale'.²⁴ While I do not consider that Giddens' concept as currently formulated 'solves' the explanatory problem in this case, its explicit concern with social action is useful in considering the mechanisms by which trade union responses are developed and implemented at the local level.

Giddens' arguments may be seen as a version of contextual theory, which emphasises the need to understand social processes and social action as *situated* in time and space. This need not mean, however, that political action is place-bound, in a negative sense. 'Geography' is not necessarily a threat to radical action, on the contrary the 'imagined communities' of particular places may consist in cultural repositories of the sort required to sustain and support progressive action of a variety of kinds, including new forms of trade unionism. In Chapter Seven I will consider the issues involved by setting the findings of my research against the context of David Harvey's discussions of the production of space and place in his analyses of processes of urbanisation in capitalist societies.²⁵

Thus I engage with the relationship between geography and social relations through two main sets of writing: those of Giddens and those of Harvey. The use of these disparate sources in the elaboration of what I consider to be key aspects of my argument runs the risks associated with theoretical eclecticism. However although they develop very different arguments they are not, I think, incompatible. In the first place I am not simply adding them together in the hope that the whole may be greater than the sum of the parts. Rather I wish to mobilise critically *aspects* of these various sources in ways which develop my own argument. Secondly, notwithstanding the disputes between them and the authors' occasional denials, all the work I have cited arguably shares a similar methodological and epistemological basis in the philosophy of critical realism. Since, as I have already

²⁴Giddens A (1979) *Central problems in social theory* (London: Macmillan)

²⁵See, *inter alia*, Harvey D (1985) *The urbanization of capital* (Oxford: Blackwell).

indicated, Sayer's text on a realist approaches to social science has throughout this study guided my attempts to develop explanations, I have few qualms about using the works mentioned in this way.

Economic and political restructuring

Many of the recent debates about the links between geography and social relations have been initiated through attempts to explain adequately the apparently dramatic changes in economic and political relations which have affected all the advanced capitalist countries since the late 1960s. These changes include the decline in many areas of traditional manufacturing industry, the growth in new places of new industries, a shift in employment structure from manufacturing jobs to service jobs, a much more internationalised financial and industrial system and in many areas a dramatic rightward shift in politics. The interrelatedness, intensity and impact of these changes have prompted many writers to suggest that they go beyond the normal fluctuations in economic and political activity and should be identified as something more fundamental: as 'structural changes' or as processes of 'restructuring'.

In some cases the terms are used in carefully specified contexts and with considerable rigour, as in the work of Doreen Massey and Richard Meegan on employment decline as a result of industrial restructuring, or in JH Bradbury's critical synthesis.²⁶ More recently their use has been extended to cover the concept of widespread (and perhaps simultaneous) fundamental changes in a variety of spheres. Ron Martin writes that

what stands out from the past fifteen years or so is the accelerating pace, profound nature and marked shift of direction of change [...] across much of the world economy generally, the industrial, socio-political and spatial forms of economic organization that provided the basis of post-war development are losing their former role as the leading sources of growth and accumulation. Previously dominant industries, technologies, methods of production, skills, class divisions, state policies and even institutional arrangements are all in decline, and are being superseded by new industries, new technologies, new production methods,

²⁶Massey D and Meegan R (1982) *The anatomy of job-loss: the how, why and where of employment decline* (London: Methuen); Bradbury JH (1985) 'Regional and industrial restructuring processes in the new international division of labour' *Progress in Human Geography*

new skills and class divisions, and new policies and institutional configurations. Rather than simply marking a temporary inflection of the economic trajectory of the post-war decades, the intense and wide-ranging reorganization since the early 1970s would seem to herald a significant break from it.²⁷

This is, on the face of it, a lot of content for even a relatively long word like 'restructuring'. The risk (which Martin avoids) is that using the word will become a substitute for careful descriptions and explanations of the changes underway. Furthermore, complete explanations of such disparate and sweeping changes are probably impossible. Transition models, as Nigel Thrift somewhat acidly remarks, 'are back on the agenda [...] but have to be used under strict conditions if they are to act as convincing explanatory tools'.²⁸

The concept of restructuring operates in my research on two levels. Firstly, and I hope relatively unproblematically, it stands (as in the title of this study) for a number of specified changes underway in the provision of local government services. Foremost among these are privatisation, work reorganisation and the introduction of elements of market competition. Secondly, it refers to aspects of wider processes of economic and political change which have led, I will argue, to the introduction of these changes into local government and indeed into the public services more generally. It is here that care is particularly required and where Thrift's injunction must be taken seriously.

As the research progressed I considered, adopted, modified and sometimes abandoned ideas from a number of accounts of 'structural change'. Among these were the work of Scott Lash and John Urry on 'disorganised capitalism', Claus Offe on the crisis of the welfare state, Harvey on 'flexible accumulation' and Jürgen Habermas on legitimization crises.²⁹ This initial survey of the literature

9:1 pp38-63.

²⁷Martin R (1988) 'Industrial capitalism in transition: the contemporary reorganization of the British space-economy' in Massey D and Allen J (eds) *Uneven re-development: cities and regions in transition* (London: Hodder and Stoughton) p203.

²⁸Thrift NJ (1989) 'New times and new spaces? The perils of transition models.' *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 7:2 pp127-8.

²⁹Lash and Urry *op. cit.*; Offe C (1984) *Contradictions of the welfare state* (London: Hutchinson); Offe C (1985) *Disorganised capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity); Harvey D (1987) 'Flexible

convinced me that any account of the impact of structural change on the trade unions needed to emphasise the role of the state, partly because, at least in Britain, the relationship between organised labour and the state has been so influential in determining the character of trade unionism, and partly because a large and very significant proportion of trade unionists work in the public sector. The critical theory of Offe and Habermas undoubtedly presented the most rigorous account of the restructuring of the state, and yet there seemed to be only limited room in their theories for trade union struggle (or indeed social struggle of any kind), and I remained unconvinced by the tightness of the links they drew between shifts in the state and shifts in the nature of capital accumulation. I wanted a set of theoretical tools which opened up a space for both autonomous struggle and autonomous politics.

I was therefore attracted by the work of the regulation theorists. While one of their key texts claims that a separate theory of state was not appropriate within regulation theory,³⁰ other writers in the regulation school have prioritised the analysis of the state in their work. In particular Bob Jessop has been developing a regulation approach to the state (on which I have drawn freely) with the added virtue, from my perspective, of relating this to debates over the nature of 'Thatcherism' whose role I discuss at some length in Chapter Three.

Insofar as this study has a unifying theoretical perspective, therefore, it is provided by regulation theory. However, my earlier comments concerning the potential benefits of eclecticism apply here too and my intention in tailoring this account of the research is that regulation theory should act as a guiding thread, rather than a complete pattern.

accumulation through urbanization: reflections on 'post-modernism' in the American city' *Antipode* 19:3 pp260-86; Habermas J (1976, German edition 1973) *Legitimation crisis* (London: Heinemann).

³⁰ Aglietta M (1979, French edition 1976) *A theory of capitalist regulation: the US experience* (London: Verso) p28.

Political

The academic literature represents one context. It partly clarifies why my arguments have evolved in the way that they have, and how I see my research relating to other work in the field. But it is only part of the story. Just as important is the political context of the research. In many respects, as I shall explain in the next section, it was the political context which prompted the research in the first place.

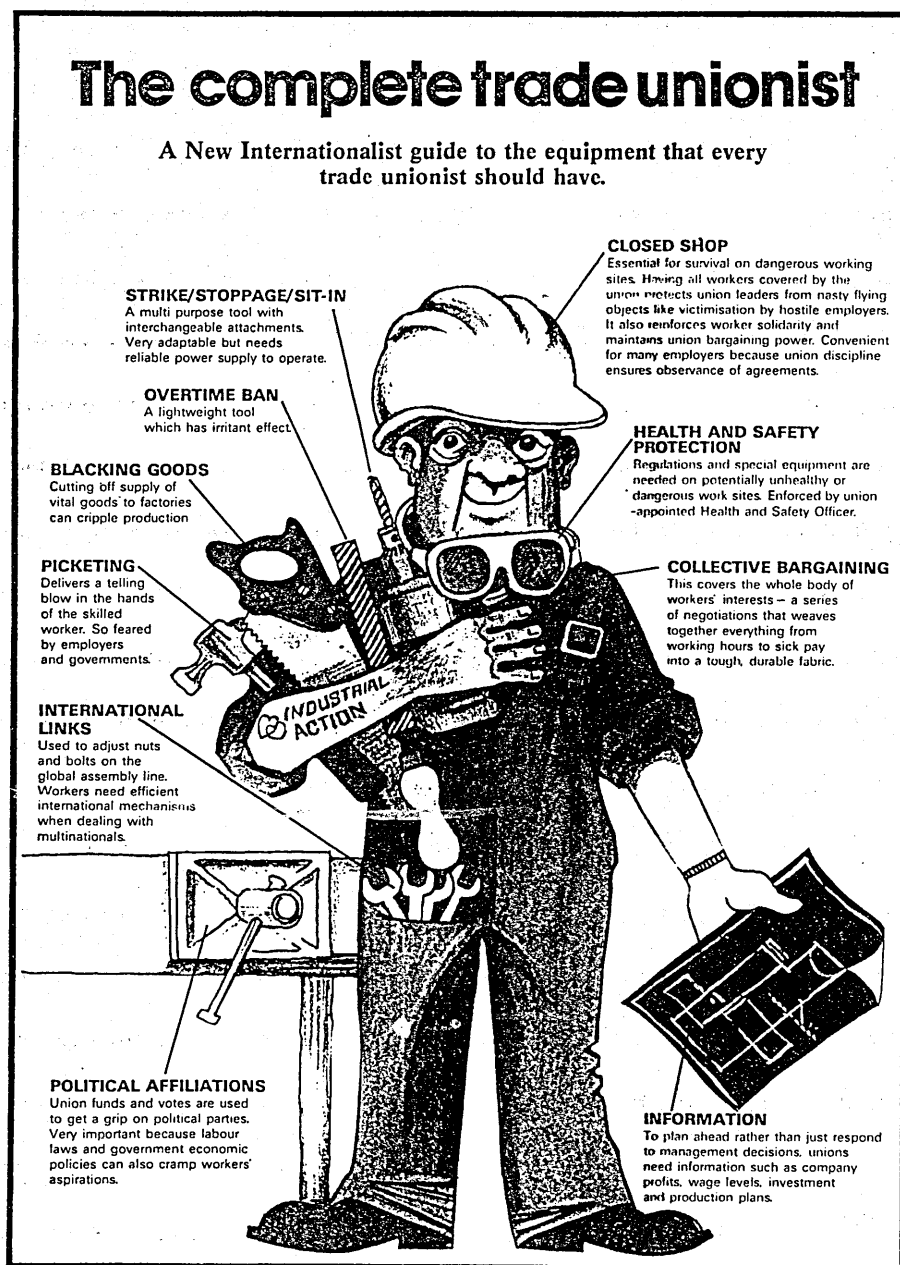
The political context is of two sorts. Firstly there is the political situation within which the empirical work was carried out, and which it seeks in part to analyse. Thus the political challenges of 'Thatcherism' to local government and trade unionism and the restructuring of local government service provision are the political context for the responses trade unions have made. They are the changes to which trade unions have been responding. As I have suggested this means that sometimes they are part of the focus of the research itself, sometimes they form part of the explanations I advance and sometimes they 'set the scene' for trade union activity in the local area. These issues will emerge in the course of my account and are not particularly controversial.

More significant for the present discussion are the political conflicts and debates to which I hope this study is a contribution. Most important of these is the conflict over the future of trade unionism, and especially the tendency to see trade unions as archaic organisations of no relevance to modern, post-Thatcher Britain. This is an ideological struggle in which the decline in trade union membership and influence is not at issue, but the interpretation of that decline most certainly is. The power of particular representations of trade unionism can best be illustrated with an example from the literature of the left.

Trade unionism has occupied a central place in the political, economic and cultural landscape of late capitalist Britain. Yet the iconography which informs interpretations of that landscape appears strangely dated. For much of the 1980s

we have been presented with pictures of a trade unionism irrevocably wedded to the past, grounded in an economic system fast disappearing beneath it and vacuously casting around its out-moded conceptual frameworks in a forlorn attempt to come to terms with a society which has no need for trade unions because it has no need for the industries which brought them forth.

Plate I.1 The complete trade unionist



The stereotype is familiar: cloth-capped, male trade unionists working in manual occupations in large-scale, Northern, manufacturing-based industries and orchestrating a universal labourist politics in smoke-filled rooms. I believe it is doubtful whether this representation was ever in *close* correspondence with the material practices and self-understandings of the women and men who joined trade unions in the 1950s and 1960s. *A fortiori*, its reproduction, unchanged, during the 1970s and 1980s entirely divorced it from those practices and understandings. None of this, however, is to deny such imagery's undoubtedly powerful effects.

It is frequently difficult to clarify the nature of the relationships between (to adopt Giddens' terminology) structures and processes of signification on the one hand and those of domination and legitimation on the other. However, this should not tempt us to assume that images and representations are in some sense entirely free-floating and not constituted by, and/or constitutive of, relations of power and sanction. On the contrary, it is clear that the representation of trade unionism as relict involved a (sometimes deliberate) attempt to bring into question the legitimacy of trade unionism in general and of its hard won, if limited, powers in particular. In other words, particular images of trade unionism (including the ones developed in this study) are simultaneously the objects of conflicts over the meaning of trade unionism and the means of conflicts over the power and legitimacy of trade unionism.

There are countless examples of the use of particular representations to further anti-union interests. Mainstream press reporting of the trade union movement in Britain is littered with the metaphors of irrelevance: the 'pre-historic', the 'antediluvian', trade unions as 'dinosaurs', the Trades Union Congress as a 'carthorse', leaders as 'barons'. However, there is no necessary relationship between the interests of particular producers of symbols and the types of symbols they adopt. In other words, once established, images are autonomous and consequently can be constitutive of (and not just constituted by) specific power

relations. An example will show how this can occur. In 1982 the radical left magazine *New Internationalist* published an issue on global trade unionism. This aimed, among other things, to present an account of trade unionism which gave due weight to involvement in trade unions by those in service and white-collar occupations, by women, by black people and by workers in colonised countries.

Notwithstanding this commitment, when the magazine tried to characterise in cartoon form the 'complete trade unionist' (complete in terms of the powers it felt a trade unionist should have) it presented an image which reproduced precisely the stereotype of a white, male, manual worker³¹ (Plate I.1). This suggests that the dominant representation of trade unionists (which casts them as products of, and only relevant to, a bygone age) has gained such iconic power that even this attempt to contest it ends up reproducing it as, of all things, 'complete'. In this way the image becomes constitutive of power relations by legitimising particular interests (namely white, male, manual workers in trade unions and those seeking to portray trade unions as outmoded).

The ossification of the dominant representation of trade unionism, while serving certain interests is not the same thing as the ossification of either the institutional structures and practices of trade unionism, or the practices of trade unionists themselves.³² In this political context, therefore, a key assumption of this study is that the reproduction and transformation of trade unionism over time should be an object of empirical enquiry, whose character cannot be read off from politically dominant accounts of the nature of trade unionism. As I will show, the trade unions and trade unionists I studied have responded to economic, political and cultural change thereby contributing to the active transformation of trade unionism in Britain.

³¹*New Internationalist* November 1982, p23. The cartoon is reproduced here by kind permission of *New Internationalist* and the artist, Clive Offley.

³²Which is not to say that our knowledge of those structures and practices is unmediated by acts of representation.

Purpose

Politics in research

It is from this political context that the *aims* of my research derive. These aims are themselves explicitly political. The heady days in which academics fondly believed that their writings could change the world may have passed, but writing is still a political act. It is political both because its subject matter is people and the power relations between them, and it is political because it is itself implicated in sets of power relations of which it may be only partially aware and over which it can only have partial control. To write about the lives of others is to engage in political activity.

My concern is that the politics of my writing should be as far as possible explicit, self-reflective and self-critical. A central part of this involves specifying the political purpose of the research. There are two main aims.

The narrow purpose

The 'narrow' aim is to provide some limited resources for the trade unionists in public services who are trying under very difficult conditions to develop a form of trade unionism relevant to the present and capable of providing radical responses to the challenges it faces. I hope that a sympathetic account of the progress of some of these struggles will be of use to other trade unionists facing similar problems in other areas.

This aim will not, unfortunately, be fulfilled by this text.³³ Having produced this 'academic' account my intention is to write others whose style and content is such that they are easily accessible by the people they are about.³⁴

³³This is so because a more immediate (and still narrower) aim is the production of a doctoral thesis. Regrettably I do not feel I have the skills required to meet the requirements of both lay accessibility and academic credibility in one document.

³⁴An initial attempt, which goes some way to meeting the requirements, is provided by: Painter J (1990) 'Seconds out, round two: the first round of compulsory competitive tendering' *CLES Research Study Series 6* (Manchester: Centre for Local Economic Strategies).

The broader purpose

A broader aim is to challenge the dominant representation of trade unionism as relict, which I discussed above, through the development of an alternative account. This aim is, I think, at least partly fulfilled in this text which consists of a set of narratives and theoretical exegeses which form one analysis of the character and causes of aspects of the changing nature of trade unionism. Other analyses could also have been written using the same material and this account does not claim in any sense to be definitive. On the contrary, the impossibility of producing a 'definitive' account is testament to the creative, as well as the political, nature of research and writing.

Practice

That creativity does not, however, imply a licence to conduct the research process any old how. Qualitative and theoretical research, on which I rely heavily, can be practised with as much rigour as statistical analyses. Moreover theoretical and empirical research cannot be divorced from each other.

The substantive material presented in the following chapters consists of accounts of the development of trade union policies and practices in response to political and economic change within a given field, that of local government services. My approach in constructing these accounts is informed by the realist philosophy of science elaborated by Sayer and others.³⁵ Thus I aim to explain change by identifying the causal mechanisms and processes which generate it, but the nature of those processes is not immediately apparent in the events they generate. This has two consequences. Firstly there is no simple division between 'the theoretical' and 'the empirical'. All empirical data or evidence is theory-laden. Secondly, analysis has to proceed through a continual movement between the abstract and the concrete. Abstraction involves distinguishing between the essential

³⁵Sayer *op. cit.*

properties and relations of objects and those which are incidental and contingent. This enables the operation of causal processes to be identified. However in order to explain concrete phenomena it is necessary to consider the ways in which characteristics which are only contingently related interact. Consider, for example, the case of a shop steward who is also a man. Through a process of abstraction we might identify one set of causal processes associated with being gendered masculine in a society where gender is a major social division and source of inequality and another set associated with being the lay representative of workers in a capitalist system. The two sets are contingently (and not necessarily) related, but that conclusion can only be drawn as the result of a process of abstraction. By contrast, if we want to consider the activities of the concrete individual we must identify what the effects of the combination of contingently-related characteristics are.

That is not to say, however, that the process of abstraction and the movement between the abstract and the concrete are mechanical processes. On the contrary, theorisation and explanation are creative, and hence the accounts produced by realist methods are fallible. All knowledge is to some extent partial, provisional and open to revision in the light of further research and theoretical development. Realism does not legislate for a set of standard procedures which can be applied universally and replicated at will. The study which follows, therefore, develops an argument which interweaves more abstract accounts of political and economic change and time-space relations with analysis of concrete organisations and places.

The material consists of elements from a variety of 'textual' sources. These include: press cuttings; broadcasts; trade union, local authority, government and other publications; the transcripts of interviews I conducted with key actors; existing 'academic' accounts in books and journals; maps; trade union, local authority and government statistics and reports; conversations with other researchers; and my own working papers and notes. In general terms this applies

to the theoretical exegeses as much as to the narrative accounts of trade union action.

This description of my sources is based on a rejection of a clear distinction between what are conventionally labelled 'primary' and 'secondary' sources. However there *is* a distinction to be made between those sources which are in the public domain, (and which readers of this study can in principle consult for themselves in assessing my arguments) and those to which for various reasons only I have access. The former are listed in the bibliography. In the case of the latter my account must be taken on trust. In order to justify that trust, I will briefly discuss how these 'private texts' were constructed.

They mostly take the form of interviews with different individuals and may be divided into two groups. Firstly, eleven interviews were conducted with key informants at the 'national level'. These included the national officers and research officers of public service trade unions and employees of local authority associations. The objects of these interviews were twofold. On the one hand, they provided information relating to the development of trade union policies at the national level. On the other, they were the source of suggestions concerning which local authorities would make appropriate case studies through which to investigate local variations in trade union responses. Secondly, once local case studies had been selected, interviews were conducted with between ten and twenty key informants in each area.³⁶

The 'key informant' status of local interviewees was established by consulting national and regional union officers. They were able to recommend which individuals in each place were most suitable for the purposes of this research. Further individuals were selected for interview when the research was in progress as necessary. The number of interviews conducted was determined by the principle of duplication: as the number of interviews undertaken in a place

³⁶The procedures used in selecting the case study areas are outlined in Chapter Six.

increased, the proportion of each interview which provided new information decreased. After a certain point the returns were diminishing so fast that it was felt unnecessary to continue with further interviews. This principle works well in the case of information which is relatively widely known and relatively uncontentious. Where information is the subject of controversy, or only known by a small proportion of interviewees, then it is much more difficult to corroborate. In these cases a judgement had to be made as to how such information should be used, if at all.

The format of the interviews varied slightly depending on circumstances. Most were semi-structured, intensive interviews conducted with one individual alone, were taped-recorded with the interviewee's permission and lasted for about one hour. The way in which I conducted each interview was guided by an outline 'interview schedule' which provided the basis for the direction of questioning. In a few cases more than one interviewee was involved, and occasionally the discussion was recorded as written notes, rather than on tape. The product of most of the interviews was a typewritten transcript of the conversation. A small number of interviewees asked that the transcript be sent to them for approval before it was used in the study, and this was done when requested. All the interviewees were guaranteed anonymity, whether it was explicitly requested or not.

Taken together, the interview transcripts and notes, and the various other textual sources (reports, cuttings, articles, policy documents etc) provided a welter of evidence of the actions taken by unions, their officers and members and of the causes and consequences of those actions. In particular I was concerned to identify the nature of the responses made by unions to the changes in local government service production and the reasons why those responses were generated, rather than others. I also sought to discover the relationship if any between the responses, and the space-time contexts in which they were developed. As I have suggested, none of this can be done in a theoretical vacuum and the account

constructed here advances its arguments by linking theoretical and empirical materials together.

Plan

I intend to develop the empirical and theoretical accounts in tandem through the subsequent chapters as follows. In **Chapter One** I focus on the causes and consequences of changing trade union membership levels during the 1980s: a subject of much controversy. Existing debates on this issue do not by and large consider in any detail changes in the practices of trade unionism in response to the shifts identified. It was this gap which provides part of the impulse for my research. In addition there has recently been a gradual increase in interest in the geographical aspects of the labour movement. As I shall argue in later chapters, 'geography' is by no means merely a passive outcome of processes of change in the structure and practices of trade unionism, rather 'space' and 'place' are actively involved in the developments. In the second part of Chapter One I chart the growth in this interest in the geography of trade unionism with a view to contributing to it through the arguments put forward in the remainder of the study.

In **Chapter Two**, I provide an account of the development of public service trade unionism in the late 1960s and 1970s. I suggest that the strong growth of public service trade unionism in this period was related both to the growth of the public services sector and increasingly to the emergence of a crisis in that sector. Furthermore, there was a close interrelation between the development of the crisis and the specific nature of the trade union practices associated with it. Finally, the crisis in the public services was itself interrelated with wider processes of change in processes of capital accumulation and state formation, which may be referred to, following the regulation school as the 'crisis of Fordism'.

Moving into the 1980s, **Chapter Three** considers how a specific set of political interventions associated with the Thatcher governments can be seen as constituting a relatively coherent attempt to resolve the crisis of Fordism through

the establishment of the conditions for a new phase of capital accumulation. Such a resolution would, if successful, have profound implications for the public services sector. However, any transition to a new 'post-Fordist mode of regulation' will develop unevenly in time and space, and be subject to phases of experimentation and set-backs, though these will not necessarily be seen as such by the agents involved.

Local government services is one area where experimentation with new forms has been important, both because its relative autonomy from central government provides the opportunity for alternatives to be developed by local councillors with more radical political views than their national counterparts and because local government services were specifically targeted as part of the Thatcherite project. **Chapter Four** considers the development of trade union responses to one such local experiment, in Wandsworth, south London, where the local council embarked on a widespread programme of service privatisation. I argue that the events of Wandsworth suggest that the unions increasingly found the forms of struggle inherited from the 1970s inadequate and began to develop new structures and practices in response. Events, however, moved on, and the Government was by now drawing on isolated local experiences and 'experiments' in developing national policies towards local government. These policies were embodied in a series of radical legislative measures during the mid- to late-1980s, among which were provisions to force local councils to put the production of many services out to competitive tender to the private sector.

The unions also perceived the need to generalise from their local experiences and drawing on these and the innovative work of the labour movement research organisation, SCAT, trade union policies towards public service privatisation were drawn up which departed markedly from the strategies adopted in the previous decade. **Chapter Five** discusses the development of these policies.

However the success of the formal national union policies depends on their

implementation in particular places by local trade union organisations. The local responses therefore heavily influence the extent to which the unions at the national level succeed in their aims. As has been noted above, the trade union movement is geographically diverse, and the development of local responses owes much to the geographical contexts in which it occurs. In **Chapter Six** I present some of the main empirical material of the research: the evidence from case studies of local trade union responses. After a discussion of the case study method, which I relate to Sayer's realism, I outline my reading of Giddens concept of 'locale' and explain how I mobilise the idea in analysing local trade union activity. I then discuss the case studies in detail showing in each case how an understanding of the institutional contexts of trade union action is crucial to its explanation.

In **Chapter Seven** I build on these arguments to consider what might be involved in the elaboration of a theoretical account of local trade union action and its broader geography in specifically capitalist societies through an analysis of the work of Harvey. I conclude that while Harvey's ideas are illuminating, his approach is ultimately unable to grasp the significance of local struggles because he adopts an unnecessarily restricted concept of 'place'.

Finally, in **Chapter Eight**, I consider the implications of the substantive research for the regulationist account of the crisis of Fordism and its potential resolution. I focus particularly on the role of struggle and creative response by the trade unions in producing an uneven and contested transition and of the geography of that trade unionism in determining the character of any 'post-Fordist mode' of regulation.

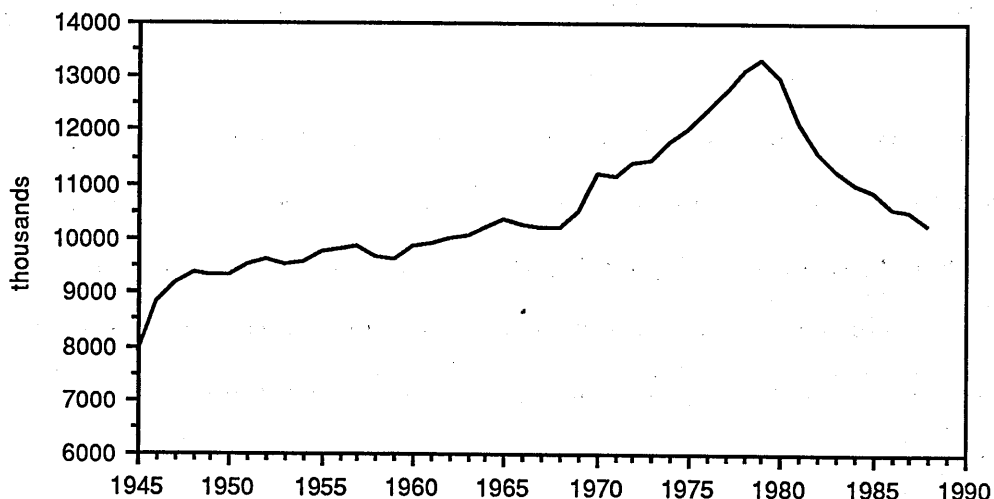
1 British trade unionism in the 1980s

Decline and debate

The parameters of decline

In 1978 the distinguished Marxist historian, Eric Hobsbawm, wondered aloud whether we had seen the forward march of labour halted.¹ The following decade saw much evidence (and most commentators) marshalled in support of this thesis. The breadth of the consensus was remarkable. It ranged from those on the right who had never had any sympathy for the labour movement or its aims to some sections of the left for whom the 1980s had seen the unions in, as Philip Bassett put it, 'a decade-long freefall into national powerlessness and irrelevance'.²

Figure 1.1: Aggregate union membership, all UK trade unions



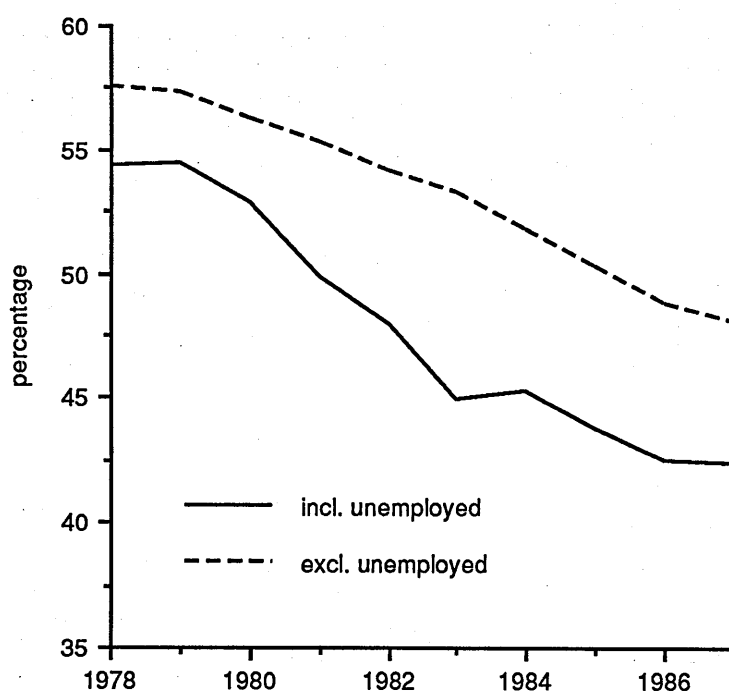
Source: Bain GS and Price R (1980) *Profiles of union growth* (Oxford: Blackwell); Bird D (1990) 'Membership of trade unions in 1988' *Employment Gazette*, May, pp259-62

¹Hobsbawm E (1981) 'The forward march of labour halted?' in Jacques M and Mulhern F (eds) *The forward march of labour halted* (London: Verso) pp1-19.

²Bassett P (1989) 'All together now?' *Marxism Today* January pp44-7, ref: p44.

A whole variety of indicators was advanced in defence of this sort of argument. After years of steady increases, aggregate union membership figures fell dramatically during the early part of the decade and have continued to decline more slowly since (Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.2: Union density, UK³



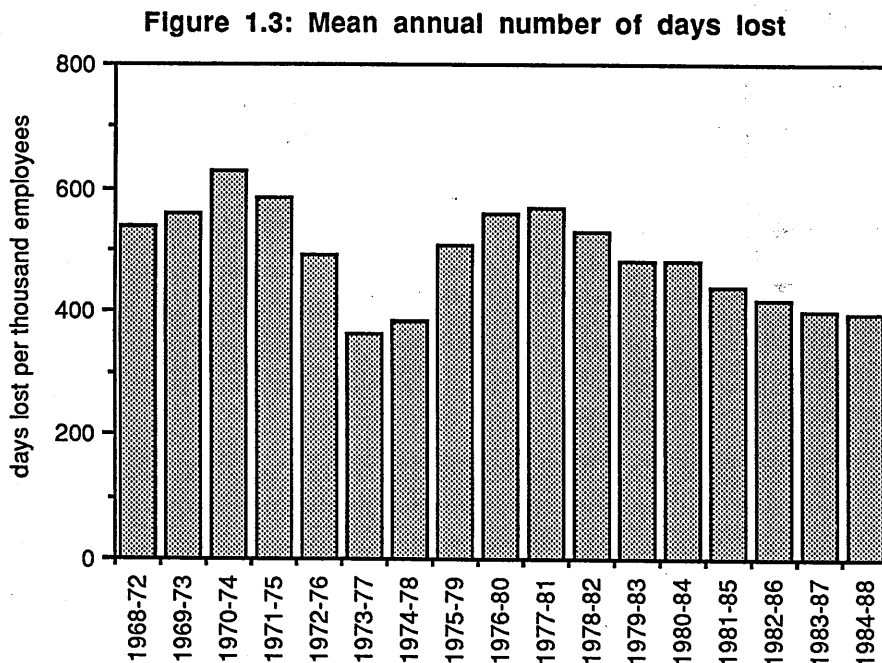
Source: *Employment Gazette*, various issues

Absolute statistics like these, while suggestive, can only provide the broadest brush account of trade unions' changing fortunes. It is also necessary to consider the relationship between trade union membership and the workforce as a whole. 'Union density' is a measure of the proportion of workers who are members of a union. Different definitions of density may be adopted depending on

³Union density 'including unemployed' was calculated by dividing the figure for total trade union membership by the number of people in the total workforce excluding self-employed and HM forces. Union density 'excluding unemployed' was calculated by dividing the membership figure by the total workforce excluding self-employed, HM forces and unemployed.

whether or not the unemployed are included in the count. Figure 1.2 shows the change in membership density calculated on two different bases for the ten-year period 1978-87.

The large rise in unemployment associated with the economic recession of the early 1980s partially accounts for this pattern. Only a very small proportion of unemployed workers remains in trade union membership. Therefore, if the unemployed are included in the count a rise in unemployment will tend to generate a fall in union density. Of more significance is the steady decrease in density among workers remaining in employment. It was evidence of this sort which prompted some commentators to talk of a 'crisis' of trade unionism.⁴



Source: derived from *Employment Gazette* July 1989 p350

Membership is not the only indicator of the status of trade unionism. Figure

⁴See for example Towers B (1987) 'After Blackpool: the wider questions' *Industrial Relations Journal* pp239-243.

1.3 shows the trend in the number of days lost in industrial stoppages between 1968 and 1988, averaged over five-year periods. The significance of these data is unclear. A high strike rate may signify a vigorous labour movement, but equally a low one may reflect a situation where trade unions can achieve their objectives without going on strike. An extended dispute, such as the coalminers' strike of 1984-5, may lead ultimately to defeat and a loss of influence. However, bearing in mind these caveats, Figure 1.3 does seem to suggest that the 1980s have seen a gradual decline in industrial militancy. When the influence of the 1984-5 pit strike disappears from the averages the annual mean is likely to fall sharply to below 200 days lost per thousand employees. However it would clearly be mistaken to suggest that the 1980s had been a quiescent decade. If the unions *were* in a 'free-fall into [...] irrelevance' in this period, they were hardly going without a fight.

The parameters of debate

Though ambiguous, these various statistics constitute a *prima facie* case for trade union decline during the 1980s. However they can say nothing about the causes of decline, or its longer-term implications. Assessing these involves considering the social processes whose operation has an impact on trade union organisation and influence. Trade unions have always had to respond to changing circumstances. What seems to have prompted the gloomy assessments of the future prospects for trade unions is the perception that the current changes are of a peculiarly fundamental and far-reaching nature.

There are thus two crucial issues to consider. Firstly, do current processes of economic and political change constitute in some sense a sea change? Secondly, if they do, do they necessarily have the sort of dire implications for trade unions predicted by Bassett and others? For example, Bassett argues that the growing non-union section of the workforce can in principle be brought into membership.⁵

⁵Bassett (1989) *op.cit.*

He even goes as far as to accept that the so-called 'business unionism' of the EETPU is not the only feasible type of response. Yet the response he *does* advocate (which is based on an individualist approach to membership recruitment and the provision of members' services such as credit cards) is not only entirely apolitical, but does not follow logically from his own assessment of the unions' current plight. Through my use of regulation theory I will consider the issues of crisis and structural change in more detail in succeeding chapters, but it will be useful here to set the terms of the debate through a comparison of the positions of Bassett and John Kelly.⁶

Bassett argues that long terms shifts in the nature of industry, work and the composition of the working class have contributed to the decline in trade union strength in the 1980s. He charts the growth of non-unionism and argues that particular problems are created for the unions by the fact that the factors which are disproportionately associated with it are increasing:

non-unionism [...] tends to be associated with the following characteristics: smaller organisations; smaller establishments within those organisations; relatively high proportions of women workers; relatively small proportions of manual workers; southern areas of the country; newer establishments; and high-technology industry. For British unions, the worrying thing about this list is its underlying link: that all these characteristics are now associated with growth in the economy. In every case, the characteristic with which non-unionism is associated is on the increase. [...] What all this seems to indicate is that the union base is dwindling: fewer and fewer people are in trade unions, more and more are not.⁷

Moreover, according to Bassett, even among union members, the changing composition of the working class has had a dramatic effect:

Though the level of trade union membership is roughly back now to what it was more than a decade ago, within that overall level the social and occupational mix of the workforce and of trade unions has changed radically: more white-collar workers, fewer blue-collar; more union members in national and local government, fewer in traditional heavy industries; more women, fewer men; more home owners, fewer council tenants.⁸

That these changes are occurring is widely acknowledged (Massey, for

⁶Bassett P (1986) *Strike free: new industrial relations in Britain* (London: Macmillan); Bassett (1989) *op. cit.*; Kelly J (1988) *Trade unions and socialist politics* (London: Verso).

⁷Bassett (1989) *op.cit.* pp46-7.

⁸Bassett (1986) *op. cit.* p35.

34. *Responding to restructuring*

example, makes similar points⁹). Where Bassett's account becomes problematic is in his attempt to read off from such social recomposition implications for industrial relations:

[...] the changes in the working class [...] may well imply the fashioning of a new, different form of employee — with different material values, different attitudes, different ambitions, different ideological views. Translated into the world of work, these changes indicate a more flexible, more consensual approach. Among the industrial changes which these new attitudes have wrought against an almost wholly altered economic background, few have probably been so far-reaching as those which have swept through the employees' representative organisations — the trade unions.¹⁰

This claim is in dramatic contrast with a number of surveys of workplace industrial relations which have emphasised the remarkable degree of continuity in the practices of trade unionism during the period of membership decline. Moreover the statement itself appears to be a *non sequitur*. If, as Bassett himself suggests, the working class is continually refashioning itself,¹¹ then it is a mistake to assume any essential relationship between the changing composition of the working class and its political views or industrial relations practices. There is no necessary reason why a service sector-based, female-dominated trade union movement should not be as radical and as solidaristic (albeit, perhaps in different ways) as the heavy engineering workers and coalminers were in the past.

The substance of Bassett's argument is that in Britain previously dominant sectors, workforces, and forms of work organisation are in decline, both numerically and in terms of their structural importance. Growth in the economy today is based on high-technology manufacturing, private sector service industries, small companies and establishments (especially in the south of England), part-time work and a relatively high proportion of women in the workforce. There is truth in this description of the way the economy is moving, and it is also true, as Bassett points out, that these characteristics have in the past been associated with high

⁹Massey D (1984) *Spatial divisions of labour: social structures and the geography of production* (London: Macmillan) pp291-3.

¹⁰Bassett (1986) *op.cit.* p40.

¹¹*Ibid.* p31.

levels of non-unionism.

I disagree, however, with his implicit assumption that there is any necessary relationship between working part-time, being employed in the service sector or being a woman and not joining a trade union. Bassett writes:

[...] unions have had to look for support to women, to part-time workers, to employees in the service sector — groups which don't have much of a history of or tendency towards trade unionism.¹²

There may be little history of unionism in private sector services, but the same cannot be said of the public sector, so employment in services as such is no bar to trade unionism. Research by John MacInnes suggests that part-time workers are no less ready to join trade unions than their full time counterparts,¹³ while the idea that women 'don't have much history of, or tendency towards trade unionism' is as offensive as it is inaccurate. Consider the Grunwick strikers in the 1970s, the hospital domestics in Cambridge, the involvement of women in the defence of mining communities during the pit strike and since, and the recent nurses' action over health service regrading. Clearly there are important difficulties in recruiting in industries, workforces and regions with limited traditions of trade union activity, but that has always been true. It was widely held during the 1930s that unions would find it impossible to recruit car workers, yet thirty years later car workers formed the backbone of the union movement.

Thus Bassett's view of modern trade unionism is curiously static and ahistorical. He equates 'full trade unionism' with the forms and structures of trade unionism associated with large scale manufacturing in the 1960s and 1970s, and implies that since those forms and structures may no longer be appropriate the unions will have to learn to live with less-than-full-trade-unionism. But that 'full trade unionism' was a product of social practice and struggle often in the teeth of employer hostility, and in the same way a new trade unionism can be developed

¹²Bassett (1989) *op. cit.* p44.

¹³*Financial Times*, 6 December 1988.

which is appropriate to the needs of workers in 'new times'.

To some extent this is recognised by Bassett, indeed the end of his *Marxism Today* article is given over to outlining a new model unionism. Unfortunately his suggestions reflect the inadequacies of his earlier analysis. For Bassett, non-unionism is to be tackled through a combination of an individualist attitude to recruitment and the provision of services to members, perhaps using associate and family membership categories. This sort of approach is required, according to Bassett, because the traditional benefits associated with trade unionism are either no longer attractive, or else can no longer be provided. In the past, so the argument goes, membership of a trade union brought higher wages, better conditions, and protection against employers' injustices. Today the average wage of union members in Britain is 'only' 10% higher than that of non-members,¹⁴ and this, according to Bassett is inadequate to encourage people to join unions. Furthermore, the benefits of trade union membership are the result of collective bargaining which in turn depends on union recognition. Today, Bassett suggests, employers see no advantage in recognising unions, and there is thus no incentive for their workers to join. As a result, unions must offer their potential members financial services and associate membership schemes to tempt them.

Yet this was not how recognition was gained in the first place. In those industries where unions are recognised for bargaining, recognition was not handed down from heaven; it had to be fought for and won. Certainly in later years (until Thatcher repealed them) there were laws providing for the statutory recognition of trade unions, but those laws in turn were the fruits of union campaigns and struggle. Bassett's view of the unions is dominated by the demands and initiatives of employers: unions must be individualist because employers are, unions must offer financial services because the employers' refusal to recognise them leaves them powerless to do anything more, IBM and MacDonald's are non-union

¹⁴Bassett (1989) *op. cit.* pp46.

companies because these employers 'see no need for unions in their business'. This is 'business unionism' with a vengeance.

Underlying Bassett's whole argument is a conception of union relevance based solely on the numbers of union members. Membership decline is clearly important, and the considerable reductions in membership suffered by trade unions over the last few years have been seriously damaging. However two things follow from this. First, the causes of that decline must be accurately understood. Most of the decline can be accounted for by unemployment. Job-loss in the recent recession was disproportionately concentrated in the sectors and regions where unions were strongest. (Though this does not mean that unions cause unemployment. The causal connection between unionisation and lower productivity, identified by David Metcalf has been challenged by Peter Nolan and Paul Marginson.¹⁵) In so far as jobs have been created they have been in the sectors and regions with limited traditions of trade unionism. This is a reflection of the changing structure of the economy and does not necessarily reflect any decline in the legitimacy of trade unionism.

Second, the unions must not be panicked into thinking that their future success should be measured simply by the number of members they recruit. Membership growth may be a necessary condition for the success of trade unions, but it is far from a sufficient one. True relevance consists in protecting and empowering the powerless and the marginalised, and it is here, rather than in the provision of mortgages and cheap pensions that the future of British trade unionism should lie. Bassett identifies a number of the characteristics associated with the growth of the British economy, but he does not identify them all. A fuller list would include: continuing high levels of unemployment; low wages and poor conditions for those employed in many private sector services especially hotels, catering, and cleaning; the de-unionisation of council workforces as their jobs are

¹⁵*Financial Times*, 19 December 1988.

put out to tender; the decline in standards of health and safety at work; and the relatively longer hours worked by British workers compared with those of competitor nations. All these are issues of traditional importance for the unions, albeit in new forms, and all are problems which have worsened as non-unionism has grown.

Whatever the specific merits, or problems of Bassett's arguments, they are predicated on the existence of a sea change in the fortunes of trade unions during the 1980s. For Bassett the downward turn in union membership levels really did represent the halting of the forward march of labour. In this view things will never be the same again.

By contrast, Kelly argues that current economic developments are essentially cyclical in character and that the fortune of the trade unions will revive when these cyclical trends reverse:

Those who believe in a crisis of the labour movement have made a series of analytical errors. They have mistaken short-term cyclical trends, such as the decline in union membership, strike frequency and bargaining power, for long-term, secular trends. All previous evidence suggests that these three indicators will rise again as the economy moves out of recession, and those who think otherwise have provided no convincing grounds for their beliefs.¹⁶

Kelly cites evidence from past periods of recession in Britain and comparisons with other countries in support of his case. He argues that past recessions have seen greater temporary declines in union membership and density than has the latest one, without affecting the long-term strength of the union movement. In addition the evidence from other countries suggests that there has not been a generalised collapse of trade union density in advanced capitalist countries and some countries have actually seen an increase in density between 1979 and 1985.¹⁷ He also points out that trade union finances have remained sound, that wage rates and earnings have not been systematically eroded and that

¹⁶Kelly *op. cit.* p289.

¹⁷*Ibid.* p269.

the popularity of trade unions in public opinion polls has increased in the Thatcher years.

Like Bassett, Kelly addresses the issues raised for the trade unions by changes in the composition of the working class. He does this through a consideration of Lash and Urry's concept of the contemporary 'disorganisation' of capitalism.¹⁸ Lash and Urry argue, according to Kelly's summary, that:

The labour movement under disorganised capitalism still exists and still engages in conflict, but compared with the past it will be more fragmented and divided, because of the increased heterogeneity of the organised working class. Its capacity to develop and sustain class consciousness, and to pursue class as opposed to merely sectional interests, will henceforth decline.¹⁹

The increased fragmentation and heterogeneity identified by Lash and Urry stems, according to Kelly from four main trends. First, the industrial working class is declining as a proportion of the workforce, while the main area of expansion is the poorly-unionised private services sector. Second, the average size of manufacturing establishments has declined and third, these establishments are becoming concentrated in small towns and rural areas. Fourth, there is a growing division in the workforce between a relatively well-paid and securely-employed 'core', and a less secure, poorly-paid 'periphery'. This is to some extent associated with the growth of part-time and temporary employment.

Kelly does not dispute the existence of these trends, but argues that they are temporary phenomena associated with recession:

The End of Organised Capitalism rightly points to a series of transformations in capital, labour and the State that have gathered pace since the 1970s, and the existence of many of the trends it identifies is beyond dispute. But the argument also implies, quite wrongly, that these trends are secular: they are not short-term products of recession that will be reversed once an economic recovery is under way. If we return to the 1930s it becomes clear that many of the factors that are today supposed to herald the decline of class politics were also present then.²⁰

Again Kelly's justification for this criticism proceeds by analogy with past

¹⁸Lash S and Urry J (1987) *The end of organized capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity).

¹⁹Kelly *op. cit.* p284.

²⁰*Ibid.* p284.

recessions. He argues firstly that in the depression of the 1930s many of the same processes of change were apparent, but that the trade unions responded to them and they had no long-term effects on the strength of the labour movement. (For example, new sectors and previously un-unionised workforces and regions were brought into membership.) Secondly he suggests that many of the trends identified by Lash and Urry are reversible. (For example, that greenfield sites 'do not remain green forever'.²¹) Thirdly, he argues that Lash and Urry's account exaggerates the extent of change.

Now in a sense Kelly is quite correct. The development of capitalism does appear to proceed in phases and there is certainly no necessary reason why trade unions should not in the future organise as great or greater a proportion of the workforce as they have in the past. Kelly's arguments are an important check to the enthusiastic declarations of the terminal decline, 'Americanisation' or 'marketisation' of the union movement.

However, in my view they beg two crucial questions. Firstly, what is it that differentiates successive phases of capitalist development such that the conditions that trade unions have to respond to in a new phase are qualitatively different from those they have seen in the past? Secondly, what are trade unions actually doing in practice to respond to changed circumstances and how effective have they been? To some extent Kelly has an answer to both these questions. To the first he implies that to all intents and purposes capitalist development is *truly* cyclical and there are therefore no important qualitative differences between one phase and the next. For example he argues that the concentration of capital in the service sector will lead to growth in the proportion of workers who work for large companies which have been traditionally easier to organise. Kelly's implicit response to the second question is that since trade unionism has revived after periods of recession in the past, there is no reason to suppose that it will not do so again.

²¹*Ibid.* p285.

Neither of these answers is entirely satisfactory. As far as the second question is concerned, the suggestion that it can safely be assumed that trade unions will revive simply because they always have in the past is a product of a degree of empiricism in Kelly's approach. The identification of an empirical regularity in the past relationship between recession and union membership provides no logical grounds for assuming that the regularity will continue in the future. In other words, there are no historical laws and history does not simply repeat itself. Whether or not trade union strength recovers depends crucially on the action trade unions and their members and officers take. (Although uncritical, Bassett's account²² has the virtue of focussing on the *practices* of trade unionism, rather than merely quantitative measures of union strength.) This relates also to the inadequacy of Kelly's implicit response to the first question I posed above. The reason that unions did revive during the new phase of capitalist development which followed the recession of the 1930s was, as Kelly recognises, precisely because they set out to organise those sections of the workforce with no tradition of or apparent inclination towards trade unionism. There seems, therefore, to be a contradiction in Kelly's account. On the one hand he argues (correctly) that trade unions can and do respond creatively to the challenge of organising apparently trenchantly non-union sections of the workforce, and that that is how unions revive in a new cycle. On the other hand he insists in his discussion of Lash and Urry that the growth of these sections is merely a short-term phenomenon which does not herald a qualitatively new phase of capitalist development at all, and which will quickly reverse in an economic recovery.

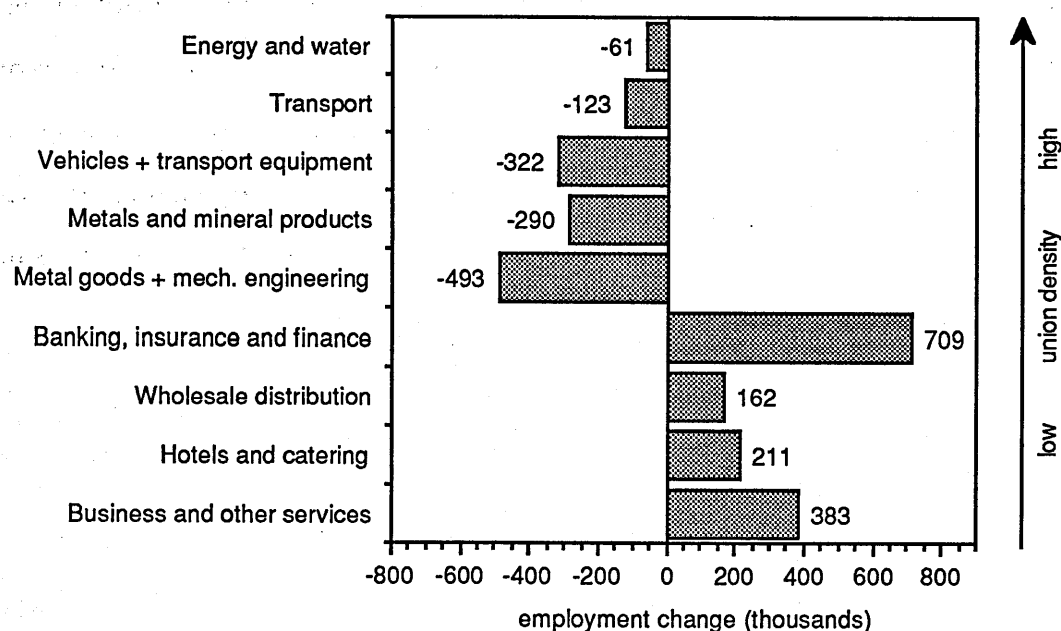
The argument that in the 1980s trade unions have been marked not by crisis and the onset of permanent decline, but by relative stability and continuity is also advanced by MacInnes.²³ Whereas Kelly focuses mostly on macro-level national

²²Bassett (1986) *op. cit.*

²³MacInnes J (1987) *Thatcherism at work* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press).

trends and membership data, MacInnes' analysis is directed to the state of workplace industrial relations. His work, thus shares with Bassett's the virtue of examining the actual practices of trade unionism, and yet he generates remarkably different conclusions. His consideration of union recognition and representation, management strategy, collective bargaining, worker participation and industrial democracy, 'flexible' working and wages lead him to conclude that the economic change in the 1980s and the Thatcher Governments have had only a limited impact on the structures and practices of workplace trade unionism. If membership has fallen it is not because of a the onset of a secular decline, but simply a matter of differential employment change in sectors with varying levels of unionisation (see Figure 1.4).

Figure 1.4: Employment change and union density, 1976-86²⁴



Source: Labour Research Department (1987) 'Unions face fall out from industrial decline' *Labour Research* September p15

However these sectoral shifts in employment structure also involve changes

²⁴Union density data refer to 1984.

in the geography of industry and of trade unionism. Although this is given only cursory attention by the writers I have been discussing, there are good reasons for supposing it to be of considerable importance to the debate. Many of the disagreements in the debate over the current state of the labour movement in Britain stem from different assessments of the significance of presently limited, but potentially extensive, shifts in employment, working practices and so on. Bassett's examples of new 'strike-free' agreements and 'single-union' deals between unions and employers are undoubtedly dramatic, but as Bassett himself acknowledges they are only characteristic of a very small number of companies.²⁵ In this debate it is always easy for an alternative account to point to other places where the changes have not occurred. This partly reflects the fact that any long-term change is likely to occur unevenly in time and space. Conventional social science has tended to see this unevenness as incidental to the 'underlying' processes of changes; in realist language it reflects the impact of contingent effects which are not part of the necessary relations constituting the real mechanisms and processes. As I have suggested in the Introduction, my research suggests that this judgement may be mistaken; the geography of trade unionism is, I believe, crucially implicated in its changing character. Our present knowledge of that geography, like the practices of trade unionism themselves, is, however, somewhat patchy.

The geography of British trade unionism: a case of uneven development?

When considering the geography of trade unionism in Britain we are faced with uneven development in two respects. In the first place trade unions clearly have an uneven geography. For example levels of membership are much higher in some areas (notably the more northern regions in general and their large cities in particular) than in others. In the second, the geography of trade unionism is at

²⁵Bassett (1986) *op. cit.* p175.

present rather unevenly understood.

For the most part the main protagonists in the debate over the existence and nature of a 'crisis' in the labour movement have had little to say about geography in systematic terms, but it is interesting to note the frequency with which issues of space, location and place impinge on their accounts, at least implicitly. Thus Kelly notes the role of locational shift in manufacturing industry in setting new conditions for unions to recruit in, while in his account of the growth of non-unionism, Bassett writes:

non-union companies tend to cluster together: there is a geographical variation in unionism, as well as sectoral and occupational variations.²⁶ Among manual workers, non-unionism is the highest in [the] south-east, the south-west and the east Midlands, with Scotland not too far behind. Among white-collar workers, it's highest in London, in East Anglia and in Scotland. Across the first four years of the 1980s, for which detailed information is available, the growth of non-unionism is startling. Just as union membership fell in every region for both manual and white-collar workers by figures ranging from just over 1% to as much as 42%, so the level of non-unionism grew (certainly, from a lower base) in an enormous range - running from 2% to more than 400%.²⁷

By and large Bassett's argument proceeds through the identification of associations between the characteristics of non-union establishments and growth in the economy. However he does occasionally identify a properly causal relationship, rather than merely a correlative one, and geography is important here:

new towns such as Milton Keynes or Basingstoke, or Livingston or Irvine, are largely non-union enclaves, *and are often promoted as such* to companies thinking of establishing themselves there.²⁸

In general however, both Kelly and Bassett consider geography only obliquely. By contrast, geography is accorded a more central place by Tony Lane.²⁹ Indeed the starting point of his analysis is explicitly geographical:

Over the last twenty years the industrial landscape, the geographical distribution of industry has undergone a profound transformation. While to some extent checked by regional policies designed to guide the flows of industrial relocation, the fact remains that there has been a flight of large scale industrial plants from conurbation centres. [... B]oth

²⁶While there is certainly geographical variation in unionism, Bassett provides no evidence for his assertion that 'non-union companies tend to cluster together'.

²⁷Bassett (1989) *op. cit.* p45.

²⁸*Ibid.* p45, emphasis added.

manufacturing and service industry is now far more widely dispersed than it was twenty years ago.³⁰

Lane bases his account on the work of Steve Fothergill and Graham Gudgin.³¹ A number of objections may be levelled at the approach they adopt in trying to identify the causes of urban and regional employment change,³² but these do not in principle compromise Lane's analysis, since he is interested in the implications, rather than the causes, of the shifts. In particular he regards the 'industrial decline of the city' as having far-reaching consequences. The decline of manufacturing and other heavy industry in its erstwhile heartlands has seen dramatic employment reductions in key areas of union strength such as Liverpool, London, Manchester, Coventry, Tyneside, Clydeside, Sheffield and South Wales.³³ The workforces of today's large cities are rather different:

In today's cities the odds are that the largest employers are in the public sector: the local councils, hospitals, universities and polytechnics. With highly sectionalised workforces, elaborate status hierarchies and little muscle, these cannot be the leading cohorts of the future.³⁴

It will become clear that I do not share Lane's pessimism in respect of the public sector, particularly in those areas with past traditions of radicalism. In part the generally downbeat tone of his assessment of the prospects for the future stems from his acceptance of the argument that the unions' legitimacy has been declining among their own membership. Indeed he refers to a 'crisis' of legitimacy in the movement. Strangely, however, geography largely disappears from his account at this point. The work of Duncan Gallie,³⁵ by contrast, suggests that there has been no significant decline in legitimacy of trade unions, and interestingly his approach

²⁹Lane T (1982) 'The unions: caught on the ebb tide' *Marxism Today* September pp6-13.

³⁰Lane *op. cit.* p7.

³¹Fothergill S and Gudgin G (1982) *Unequal growth* (London: Heinemann).

³²See the debates in Massey D and Meegan R (eds) (1985) *Politics and method: contrasting studies in industrial geography* (London: Hutchinson).

³³Lane *op. cit.* p7.

³⁴*Ibid.* p8.

³⁵Gallie D (1987) 'Patterns of similarity and diversity in British urban labour markets: trade union allegiance and decline' paper presented at the *Sixth Urban Change and Conflict Conference* University of Kent 20-23 September.

is based on an analysis of geographically differentiated data. According to Gallie, the differences between places, both in union membership levels and in the level of commitment to trade unions among workers, can only be accounted for by considering differences in the history of trade union organisation in each place which affects the early socialisation of the workforce, and consequently its attitudes to unionism. Gallie found that industrial centres had suffered most from recession and were also the areas of greatest trade union strength, but at the same time the traditions of strong union organisation in those places meant that the unions were more resilient (and maintained their popular legitimacy better) than elsewhere.

Notwithstanding the differences between them, what the work of Lane and Gallie suggests is that both geographical change and spatial variations in social phenomena enter into the heart of contemporary developments in trade union strength and activity. Their accounts also imply that attempts to explain those developments would benefit from an understanding of the existing geography of the labour movement and of the way *that* is changing.

To date there have been relatively few contributions to the development of such an understanding. From an historical perspective Humphrey Southall considers the nineteenth century through an examination of statistical records relating to friendly societies,³⁶ and Peter Sunley³⁷ covers one aspect of the enduring geography of trade unionism through the twentieth century in his analysis of the coalminers' strikes of 1926 and 1984. The latter of these disputes is used by Mick Griffiths and Ron Johnston to consider the relationship between 'place' and trade unionism.³⁸ For the contemporary period geographers analysing the

³⁶Southall H (1988) 'Towards a geography of unionization: the spatial organization and distribution of early British trade unions' *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 13,4 pp466-483.

³⁷Sunley P (1990) 'Striking parallels: a comparison of the geographies of the 1926 and 1984-5 coalmining disputes' *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 8 pp35-52.

³⁸Griffiths M and Johnston R (1991) 'What's in a place? An approach to the concept of place, as illustrated by the British National Union of Mineworkers' strike, 1984-85' *Antipode* 23:2 pp185-213.

restructuring of the UK economy sometimes make reference to the geography of the labour movement, although it is only infrequently the central focus of their concerns. For example, in his analysis of the 'political economy of Britain's north-south divide' Martin³⁹ maps the regional variation in levels of union membership and industrial militancy as two among many indicators of the growing inequality between different regions of the country. Kevin Morgan and Andrew Sayer⁴⁰ illustrate how intra-regional variations in trade union traditions can influence the location of new investment and how management may seek actively to 're-make' the industrial relations context with which it is faced.

Doreen Massey and Nick Miles⁴¹ focus more explicitly on the changing geography of the labour movement. They point out that in the past the geography of trade unionism has tended to mirror that of the traditional manufacturing sectors in which the unions have been based. This produced a spatial distribution of union membership characterised by areas of concentration which they term 'heartlands'. In some cases, notably those of the large cities, several heartlands overlapped to produce particular areas of more general union strength. With the decline of those traditional industries and the growth of services, particularly public services, the geography of the union movement has become much more dispersed. In addition, Massey and I have recently considered how these developments have been affected by the political attack on the union movement by the Thatcher government, which seems on occasion to have displayed a remarkably deft geographical sense.⁴²

Finally, a small number of industrial relations specialists have focussed on spatial variations in unionisation. Neil Millward and Mark Stevens consider survey data from the 1984 Workplace Industrial Relations Survey ('WIRS') and from the

³⁹Martin R (1988) 'The political economy of Britain's north-south divide' *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 13,4 pp385-418.

⁴⁰Morgan K and Sayer A (1985) 'A "modern" industry in a "mature" region: the remaking of management-labour relations' *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 9 pp383-403.

⁴¹Massey D and Miles N (1984) 'Mapping out the unions' *Marxism Today* May pp19-22.

⁴²Massey D and Painter J (1989) 'The changing geography of trade unions' in Mohan J (ed) *The political geography of contemporary Britain* (London: Macmillan) pp130-150.

Government's Social Attitudes Survey.⁴³**Table 1.1: Regional variations in union density, 1984**

| | All workers | Manual workers | Non-manual workers |
|--------------------|-------------|----------------|--------------------|
| Great Britain | 58 | 67 | 51 |
| East Anglia | 40 | 52 | 35 |
| Greater London | 47 | 65 | 37 |
| Rest of South East | 43 | 47 | 41 |
| South West | 55 | 62 | 47 |
| East Midlands | 61 | 66 | 56 |
| Scotland | 63 | 67 | 60 |
| West Midlands | 65 | 71 | 59 |
| Yorks/Humberside | 67 | 73 | 61 |
| Wales | 71 | 79 | 66 |
| North West | 71 | 80 | 65 |
| North | 72 | 83 | 61 |

Source: Millward N and Stevens M (1988) 'Union density in the regions' *Employment Gazette* May pp286-295

Table 1.1 broadly confirms in more systematic terms and at the regional level what most of the previously cited accounts imply. Namely, that trade unionism is concentrated disproportionately in Scotland, Wales and the northern part of England. The relatively high density figures in the table probably stem from the exclusion of establishments with fewer than 25 employees which are known to have below average levels of unionisation. On the other hand the survey also excludes the heavily unionised coal mining sector, which will have distorted the results in regions with major employment in that industry. Millward and Stevens

⁴³Millward N and Stevens M (1988) 'Union density in the regions' *Employment Gazette* May pp286-295.

analyse their data by attempting to 'control' or 'adjust' for regional variations in industrial mix, workplace size and ownership characteristics. Leaving aside the methodological issues raised by this sort of approach,⁴⁴ they found that regional variations persisted after the figures had been adjusted in this way. The authors go on to speculate that:

an obvious suggestion is that the higher levels of unionisation outside the four southern regions of Britain arise from a tradition of union involvement that emerged when those regions had more large-scale heavy industry than they do now.⁴⁵

However, they conclude that 'examining this [...] is beyond the scope of our current analysis'. A similar approach is adopted by PB Beaumont and RID Harris, who use both shift-share and multivariate statistical analysis to dissect regional variations in trade union recognition agreements.⁴⁶ They conclude that there is a significant difference in the average level of union recognition between the north and the south of Britain, 'even when other influences (such as plant and enterprise size, the age of the plant, and occupation mix) are controlled for'.⁴⁷ Again, however, methodological objections can be levelled at their approach, and again they are able to conclude only that they have identified 'a number of important differences emerging which point to the particular ways in which different regional traditions with regard to unionization have been manifested'⁴⁸ without extending their analysis to consider the impact of those variations in tradition in detail.

The work of geographers and others on spatial variations in trade union

⁴⁴The principal objection which may be raised is that characteristics such as industrial structure, size and labour movement traditions are not discrete variables whose effects can be straightforwardly added together or subtracted from the 'whole'. Firstly, the various characteristics are interrelated: they affect each other. For example, labour movement traditions are closely linked with the development of different industries in different regions. Secondly, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Acting together characteristics or 'variables' may produce 'emergent effects' which cannot necessarily be detected or predicted when those characteristics are considered in isolation from each other.

⁴⁵Millward and Stevens *op.cit.* p293.

⁴⁶Beaumont PB and Harris RID (1989) 'The north south divide in Britain: the case of trade union recognition' *Oxford Bulletin of Economics and Statistics* 51:4 pp413-428.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, p423.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, p426.

membership and activity is thus at an early stage. A number of geographers have pointed to the importance of trade unionism in the changing human geography of Britain and some industrial relations specialists have noted the importance of geographical variation to developments in trade unionism. In addition to the emerging focus on mapping and examining the spatial variation in membership levels and other characteristics it will be important to flesh out these accounts with an appreciation of the practices of trade unions and their members, the transformation of those practices through time and across space and the relationship between those transformations and the places in which they occur.

2 Public service trade unionism and the political geography of Fordism

The pattern of growth

If the geographical patterning of trade unionism in Britain is still only partly understood, the implications that this patterning has for the development of trade unionism is currently yet more obscure. Yet, as I suggested in the Introduction, the geography of social relations is increasingly recognised as having important effects on the operation of social processes. I now want to begin my exploration of these connections by considering the period before the recent decline in trade union membership which I charted in Chapter One.

It was during this period that strong membership growth both stemmed from, and had an influence on, the conditions of production of public services in Britain, and those provided by local government in particular. The legacy of the growth during this period has had, I will claim, a considerable impact on the nature of trade union responses to change in those conditions during the 1980s. It is therefore of key importance to consider the pattern of that growth in some detail.

Moreover, I want to suggest that the interrelationships between the growth of public service unionism and the conditions of production of public services in the 1960s and 1970s can only be understood as the products of the particular mix of economic, political and cultural conditions existing in Britain at the time. Interpreting the impact of those conditions requires a methodological perspective which does not simply collapse political and cultural relations onto the motions of the economy, but which does recognise the connections *between* these various spheres and which can identify the causal mechanisms at work in each case. In

addition it must provide the means for interpreting how *crises* in those economic, political and cultural relations arise and what the necessary and sufficient conditions are for their resolution. Such a perspective is provided by regulation theory.¹

The particular mix of social relations with which I am concerned in this chapter is usually labelled 'Fordism' by regulation theorists. The partial breakdown of these relations in the 1970s is thus the 'crisis of Fordism'. I will adopt these terms since it would be very difficult to discuss the work of regulation theorists without doing so. However, there are some problems with them. One difficulty is that 'Fordism' is used both within and outside the regulationist literature. As Bob Jessop puts it: 'not every study of Fordism is regulationist nor is every regulationist study concerned with (post-)Fordism'.² Another problem is that the term is used to describe a number of *different* social phenomena. Thus Fordism is simultaneously a particular form of the labour process, a particular 'regime of accumulation' and a particular 'mode of regulation'. Granted, part of the object of the exercise is explicitly to link these various aspects of social life together, but this can lead to misunderstandings. For example critics of regulation theory may argue that the existence of many examples of non-Fordist labour processes 'disproves' the existence of a Fordist regime of accumulation.³ A methodological reading of regulation theory, by contrast, would recognise that the production of some goods and services by non-Fordist processes is not incompatible with the existence of a 'regime of accumulation' and may even be a

¹I deliberately stress the *methodological* significance for two reasons. Firstly, I want to use the perspectives and concepts of the regulation approach without necessarily being bound by the specific *substantive* claims of its major proponents. Secondly, I want to defend the guiding principles of regulation theory against attempts to discredit the approach as a whole by refuting one or more of those claims.

²Jessop B (1990) 'Regulation theories in retrospect and prospect' *Economy and Society* 19:2 p154.

³A related but slightly different mistake is committed by Simon Clarke who engages in a faintly bizarre attempt to argue against regulation theory by showing that the vision of a utopian society drawn up by Henry Ford (an American capitalist) shares no features with the regulation theorists analyses of Fordism. This seems to me to be an exercise in literalism of the utmost sterility. See Clarke S (1990) 'New utopias for old: Fordist dreams and Post-Fordist fantasies' *Capital and Class* 42 pp131-155.

necessary feature of such a regime.

This recognition that the characteristic social forms of particular 'regimes of accumulation' or 'modes of regulation' do not need to be ubiquitous for the insights of the regulation school to hold has important implications for geographers. In particular it suggests that the 'mixes' of social relations which the regulation approach seeks to analyse may well develop unevenly in space and time.⁴ Moreover that unevenness may then impact back on social processes in ways which materially affect their operation. The effects of this geography may be either functional or dysfunctional for the continued reproduction of the social relations which produced it. Spatial unevenness may either work with, or undermine, current social processes. For example, in the specific case of the processes associated with the accumulation of capital, David Harvey shows how particular spatial configurations of social relationships ('spatial fixes' and 'structured coherences') can tend first to support, and then to act as a barrier to, the further development of capitalist relations of production and consumption.⁵ I will return to Harvey's arguments in Chapter Seven.

I will discuss the regulation approach and the characteristic geography of British Fordism in relation to both public services and the trade unions below. First I want to briefly outline the pattern of development of public service trade unionism during the 1970s.

Labour movement strength in the public services sector was built up remarkably rapidly in tandem with a more general growth of trade unionism especially among white-collar workers. In 1964 the unions which subsequently merged to form the white-collar union ASTMS (Association of Scientific, Technical

⁴Hudson R (1989) 'Labour market changes and new forms of work in old industrial regions: maybe flexibility for some but not flexible accumulation' *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 7:1 pp5-30.

⁵Harvey D (1985) 'The geopolitics of capitalism' in Gregory D and Urry J (eds) *Social relations and spatial structures* (London: Macmillan) pp128-163.

and Managerial Staffs) shared a combined membership of 72,800.⁶ By 1979 ASTMS had 471,000 members,⁷ which represents an increase of nearly 550% in fifteen years and an average annual growth rate of 13%. The growth in white-collar unionism is partly a reflection of the changing occupational structure of the United Kingdom economy. For example, in the white-collar banking, insurance and finance sector there were 583,000 potential union members in 1968. By 1979 their numbers had increased to 720,900, a rise of 23.7%.⁸ However the number of *actual* union members rose by 57.9% from 250,300 to 395,300, while union membership in the economy as a whole increased over this period by 30.4%. Thus the growth was not only a result of a changing economic structure, but demonstrates an increasing propensity among workers to join trade unions *within* particular sectors.

The simultaneous large increase in trade union membership in the public services also involved many white-collar workers. The white-collar public service union NALGO expanded rapidly during the 1960s and 1970s. In 1960 its membership was 274,000, but by 1982 this had grown to 784,297.⁹ The mainly manual workers' union, NUPE, also grew strongly, from 283,471 in 1968 to 712,392 in 1978.¹⁰ Nearly three-quarters of this increase was due to the recruitment of women, many working part-time. Hyman's figures show that the growth of these unions and others meant that the proportion of the public sector workforce belonging to a trade union increased substantially, from 66.1% in 1968 to 82.4% in 1979.¹¹

During the same period the number of trade unionists in the public services

⁶Taylor R (1980, first edition 1978) *The fifth estate: Britain's unions in the modern world* (London: Pan) p33.

⁷Coates K and Topham T (1988, first edition 1980) *Trade unions in Britain* (London: Fontana) p64.

⁸*Ibid.* p59.

⁹Hyman R (1985) 'Class struggle and the trade union movement' in Coates D, Johnson G and Bush R (eds) *A socialist anatomy of Britain* (Cambridge: Polity) pp110-111.

¹⁰Taylor *op.cit.* p349.

¹¹Hyman *op. cit.* p109

grew as a proportion of total union membership. Thus, as Table 2.1 suggests, the 1970s saw public sector services become increasingly important to the British union movement.

Table 2.1: Public service unionism as a proportion of all unionism

| Sector | Trade union members in 1968 (000s) | As a percentage of all trade unionists | Trade union members in 1979 (000s) | As a percentage of all trade unionists |
|--|---------------------------------------|--|---------------------------------------|--|
| Post and telecommunications | 400.6 | 3.93 | 427.6 | 3.22 |
| Electricity | 181.5 | 1.78 | 178.3 | 1.34 |
| Railways | 228.9 | 2.25 | 204.2 | 1.54 |
| Water | 33.5 | 0.33 | 61.4 | 0.46 |
| National government | 457.1 | 4.48 | 583.8 | 4.39 |
| Gas | 90.5 | 0.89 | 95.5 | 0.72 |
| Local government (including education) | 1366.8 | 13.41 | 2232.0 | 16.80 |
| Health | 369.8 | 3.63 | 971.2 | 7.31 |
| Total | 3128.7 | 30.69 | 4754.0 | 35.77 |

Source: adapted from Coates K and Topham T (1988) *Trade unions in Britain* (London: Fontana) pp58-9; Pelling H (1987) *A history of British trade unionism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin) p300; *Employment Gazette* various issues

However Table 2.1 also shows that this growth in importance was uneven within the public service sector. In fact membership in traditional strongholds of trade unionism like the Post Office and British Rail declined as a proportion of total union membership. By contrast local government trade unionists grew in relative terms from 13.41% of all trade unionists in 1968 to 16.8% in 1979, while the proportion of all trade unionists who worked in the health service doubled over the same period from 3.63% to 7.31%. By 1979, then, nearly one trade unionist in every four worked in either local government or the health service.

The major utilities were essentially, and in some cases still are, nationalised industries. Local government and health care, on the other hand, are central to the welfare state. Christine Cousins stresses the differential growth in trade unionism

in these two parts of the public sector.

In Britain, unionization in the public sector has been higher than in the private sector throughout the post-war period, but whilst union organisation has a long tradition in the nationalised industries, only in the 1970s was there a significant development in unionism in the public service sector. In the period 1969-1979, the health services and local government, and education services added 1.5 million union members, nearly 50% of total national union growth. Much of this growth is associated with increased white-collar and female unionization.¹²

Thus the absolute and relative growth of public service trade unionism during the 1970s was overwhelmingly a growth in welfare state trade unionism. This development partly accounts for the increasingly dispersed geography of trade union membership identified by Massey and Miles and referred to in Chapter One above.¹³ They argue that after the Second World War the British trade union movement was based 'in the cities and in particular regions of industrial concentration'.¹⁴ This was largely a product of the way the industrial structure of the economy was geographically differentiated. From the end of the 1950s, however, these 'heartlands' declined and a more dispersed geography developed. Although there are geographical variations in welfare provision, employment in public services is by its nature fairly evenly regionally distributed in relation to population. A general increase in trade union membership in this sector relative to the levels of membership in manufacturing industry, for example, will therefore tend to produce a more even geography of union membership overall.

In their discussion of the parliamentary representation of trade unions through their sponsorship of Labour MPs, Coates and Topham make a similar point about the decline of the traditional bases of trade unionism to that put forward by Massey and Miles:

Direct trade union sponsorship takes a variety of forms. Its classic shape is to be found in the declining numbers of safe mining seats, in which the NUM used to be able to boast that they could weigh the votes necessary to secure their victories. Other occupational concentrations explain how some unions are able to secure representation in particular

¹²Cousins C (1987) *Controlling social welfare* (Brighton: Wheatsheaf) p125.

¹³Massey D and Miles N (1984) 'Mapping out the unions' *Marxism Today* May pp19-22.

¹⁴*Ibid.* p19.

But they go on to assert that for the newly-expanded white-collar and public sector unions this is not the case:

Whilst it is clear that there are mining constituencies, and may once have been 'railway' constituencies, or 'engineering' towns, it is doubtful whether there are ASTMS cities, or NUPE counties.¹⁶

This may be true for the specific activity of the selection of Labour Party parliamentary candidates. However, as I will suggest below, that there are in fact grounds for believing that the labour movement in Britain's large cities *is* often marked by the predominance of public service unions.

The significance of a particular sector to trade unionism in general does not consist solely of the contribution it makes in terms of numbers of members. Indeed there is no necessary relation between the size of membership of a trade union and its political, economic or industrial power. A small union can sometimes have considerable influence if its members are in key occupations. The role of the diminutive NACODS¹⁷ was important during the miners' strike of 1984-85 because its members are responsible by law for safety at coal mines. By contrast a large general union like the Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU) may find it difficult at some periods to gain influence in proportion to its size because the varied nature of the occupations in which it organises may mean that there are fewer common interests among its members than might be the case with a smaller union. Therefore to assess the overall significance of trade unionism in the public services during the 1970s it is necessary to consider both the *politics* and the *practices* of that trade unionism, as well as membership growth and its causes. I have suggested that understanding these politics and practices involves examining the political and economic context in which they developed. Before considering the

¹⁵Coates and Topham *op. cit.* p339.

¹⁶*Ibid.* p340.

¹⁷National Association of Colliery Overmen, Deputies and Shotfirers.

practices of public service unionism in the 1970s, therefore, I want to discuss the perspective of regulation theory in more detail and in particular its treatment of the role of public services and trade unionism under Fordism.

The political geography of Fordism

Regulation theory: a methodological perspective¹⁸

As theoretical traditions go, the 'regulation school' is pretty disparate. Jessop has identified seven different schools: three in France, and one each in Holland, Germany, Scandinavia and North America.¹⁹ (Jessop modestly avoids identifying his own work as part of a British school.) My own use of regulation theory draws principally on the Parisian school and the work of Jessop himself. The roots of Parisian regulation theory lie in Marxist political economy in general and in Althusserian structuralism in particular. However, while Althusserian analysis tended to see the reproduction of social formations as occurring 'quasi-automatically',²⁰ regulation theory became concerned with how capitalism survived at all, given its necessary tendencies to breakdown, crisis and rupture. As Alain Lipietz describes it, 'the regulation of a social relation is *the manner in which this relation is reproduced, notwithstanding its conflictual and contradictory character*'.²¹

In very general terms regulation theory addresses this problem by identifying sets of institutional forms which act together to stabilise ('regulate') contradictory social relations. The combination of institutions involved is known as the 'mode of regulation'. The particular pattern of capital accumulation (involving a specific

¹⁸Early regulationist studies stressed the methodological significance of the approach as can be seen in the Introduction to Aglietta's key text (Aglietta M (1979, French edition 1976) *A theory of capitalist regulation: the US experience* (London: Verso) pp 9-17). This methodological emphasis has recently been revived. See, *inter alia*, Jessop (1990) *op. cit.*; and Boyer R (1990) *The regulation school: a critical introduction* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press) especially pp60-66.

¹⁹Jessop (1990) *op. cit.*

²⁰*Ibid.* p170.

²¹Lipietz A (1988) 'Reflections on a tale: the Marxist foundations of the concepts of regulation and accumulation' *Studies in Political Economy* 26 p14, emphasis original.

relationship between production and consumption) which is regulated by the mode of regulation is known as the 'regime of accumulation'. The mode of regulation is unlikely to be able permanently to control contradictory tendencies, and eventually these may become overwhelming, leading to a breakdown of stability and a phase of crisis and restructuring. During the crisis phase new institutional forms emerge through processes of social and political struggle.²² These new forms may act together to establish a new period of stability, but will not necessarily do so.

Institutional forms obviously vary from one mode of regulation to another. They may include the labour process, the form of the wage relation, the social consumption norm, the public provision of consumption goods and services (the 'welfare state'), the mechanisms of collective bargaining, the money and credit systems and the mechanisms of popular representation. They therefore include, but cannot be reduced to, the functions of the state. In regulation theory 'regulation' does not mean *state* regulation, and a phase of state deregulation of the economy does not mean that regulation has been reduced, merely that its form has changed.

Two crucial points should be stressed. Firstly, institutional (or 'structural') forms can be, and often are, autonomous from each other. They have their own patterns of historical development and conditions of emergence. They are likely to interact and this may lead to a phase of stability, but they cannot be reduced to some grander process like 'the accumulation of capital'. According to Aglietta:

None of these structural forms can play its role in the mitigation of social contradictions without the simultaneous operation of all the others. But this simultaneous operation is in no way something inherent in the logic of accumulation. On the contrary, the structural forms are separate from one another and each covers a specific field within the overall space of capitalist social relations.²³

Secondly, if institutional forms interact to produce stability this is contingent.

²²This is not to imply that social and political struggles do not occur during other periods: they do. However it is during crises that they have a real chance of influencing the fundamental direction of social development. At other times they may be effective in producing change within the parameters of the existing system and they may have the effect of precipitating a crisis.

²³Aglietta *op. cit.* p383.

Social and economic stability is not inevitable. Indeed the contradictory nature of social relations suggests that it might be expected to be the exception rather than the norm. In one sense it is precisely the apparent unlikeliness of phases of stability that prompts regulation theorists to investigate their causes. This stress on the contingent nature of regulation means that regulation theory is explicitly non-functional. It deliberately avoids the claim that certain institutions arise because they are 'needed' for the reproduction of the system. Alain Lipietz makes these points powerfully:

Above all — and this is the most important point — the emergence of a new type of accumulation is not preordained in the course of capitalism. Even if it does correspond to certain noticeable tendencies, the stabilization of a mode of regulation is not the necessary outcome of a system of accumulation emerging from Plato's cave to dictate the laws to us, shadows. Accumulation and regulation are discoveries in the history of men's [*sic*] struggles and they have worked for so long as they have guaranteed some regularity and permanence in the social reproduction.²⁴

In counselling against 'pessimistic functionalism', he goes on:

In short, what we have said about the much more improbable than likely existence of capitalism and its concrete instances must not lead us to think on the contrary that 'when it works, it must have been designed for that purpose', or that this mode of regulation *was meant* to encourage this regime of accumulation, for example like saying that Social Security was invented for the purpose of keeping mass production running smoothly.²⁵

The regime of accumulation which emerged between the two World Wars and developed fully in the 1950s is known as 'Fordism', and involved the dominance of *intensive* accumulation. According to Aglietta, under an intensive regime, capital accumulation proceeds through the extraction of *relative* surplus value.

Surplus value is the difference between the value produced by labour and the value required to maintain and reproduce labour. Under capitalism this difference is appropriated by capital and is the source of capitalist profit. To simplify, if t_v is the time during which value is produced, and t_n the time during which the value necessary for the reproduction of labour is produced, then the time in which

²⁴Lipietz A (1984) 'Imperialism or the beast of the apocalypse' *Capital and Class* 22 pp81-109 ref:p86.

²⁵Lipietz (1984) *op. cit.* p87.

surplus value is produced (t_{sv}) is equal to $t_v - t_n$.²⁶ Surplus value can therefore be increased in one of two ways. Extracting *absolute* surplus value involves increasing t_v , while relative surplus value is extracted by shortening t_n . Increasing t_v can be done by drawing more people into production, or by making them work longer hours. By contrast shortening t_n involves increasing the productivity of labour through mechanisation. This lowers the value of the commodities produced, and thereby shortens the 'socially necessary labour time' (t_n).

However, the mechanisation associated with the transition from an extensive to an intensive regime of accumulation also generated a great expansion in the volume of consumption goods produced. For accumulation to proceed, a minimum level of working class consumption was required to allow the realisation of surplus value in the form of money capital. This consumption level was reached, but this did not happen automatically. Rather, processes of social and political struggle led to the institutionalisation of certain of the structural forms mentioned above, and it was these which provided the sufficient conditions for continued accumulation.

I will discuss the character of some of the structural forms of British Fordism in more detail shortly. Before doing so, however, I want to consider the relationship between regulation theory and realist philosophy, because in my view this clarifies another key feature of regulationist accounts which is important in the present study, namely the stress regulation theory places on the national level.²⁷

Capital accumulation always occurs in specific concrete situations in particular places. However, through a process of abstraction in thought it is possible to identify the common features of all processes of capital accumulation,

²⁶This is a considerable simplification for the purposes of clarity. In fact 't' should be defined as abstract labour time, rather than actual hours and minutes. Thus increasing the rate of work involves the extraction of absolute, not relative surplus value. However, since the emphasis in this study is on the regulation of accumulation rather than the accumulation process as such, subsequent arguments do not depend heavily on the labour theory of value in the way that they do in Aglietta's early work.

²⁷Harris L (1988) 'The UK economy at the crossroads' in Allen J and Massey D (eds) *The economy in question* (London: Sage) p35.

including those necessary relations (such as the wage relation) which define them as capitalist. Moving back down the hierarchy of abstraction cannot be done deductively. The nature of the more concrete cannot be derived from the abstract purely in thought but can only be understood by combining knowledge from empirical investigation of other phenomena which are contingently related. This movement between the abstract and the concrete, which I referred to in the Introduction, is a hallmark of realist philosophy of science, and is spelt out in more detail by Sayer.²⁸ As I have suggested, regulation theory is predicated on a realist approach and this is elaborated by Jessop. For Jessop, the movement from the abstract to the concrete involves the 'articulation' of concepts of different levels of abstraction.²⁹ He points out that at any given level of abstraction within this hierarchy of concepts, the character of more concrete situations is indeterminate until the contingent conditions are specified.³⁰ Those conditions can only be identified through empirical research.

What regulation theory does is to take seriously the business of specifying the contingent conditions which enable the stabilisation of accumulation. Many of these contingent conditions are the product of processes which vary from state to state because they are the outcome of different national legal frameworks, political systems, forms of trade union organisation and mechanisms for monetary control. In abstract terms the processes and tendencies whose contradictions are regulated

²⁸Sayer A (1984) *Method in social science: a realist approach* (London: Hutchinson) pp128-132.

²⁹See Jessop (1990) *op. cit.* p154. There the reader is referred to the discussion of 'articulation' in Jessop B (1982) *The capitalist state: marxist theories and methods* (Oxford: Blackwell) pp213-220. This account is closely argued and complex, but if my interpretation is correct it is, in its essentials, making the same argument as does Sayer.

³⁰Derek Gregory uses this idea of a conceptual hierarchy to criticise Sayer's treatment of geography. He suggests that Sayer reduces the significance of spatial form to the levels of the contingent and the concrete, and argues that 'spatial configurations are important not only for concrete research but also for "abstract research"'. He claims that Sayer has partly conceded this point, but continues 'to regard abstract propositions about time-space relations as highly generalized'. For Gregory, 'what this seems to indicate [...] is not a rigid dividing line between "abstract" and "concrete" research, but rather the need for the careful delineation of a hierarchy of concepts in which time-space relations become ever more tightly specified'. (Gregory DJ (1986) 'Realism' in Johnston RJ, Gregory DJ and Smith DM (eds) *The dictionary of human geography* (Oxford: Blackwell) pp389-90.)

by modes of regulation are the same wherever capital accumulation occurs. Once the analysis becomes more concrete, however, and the specific mechanisms of regulation are identified, the seamless web of 'capital in the abstract' fragments. Among the most significant of the fractures are those which run along national boundaries.³¹

The implication of this method for substantive regulationist accounts is that 'modes of regulation' will often have an important national specificity, at least for as long as nation states retain a degree of political autonomy from each other.³² Indeed some regulation theorists have made this explicit by developing the concept of 'national mode of growth' to specify 'the pattern of production and consumption considered in terms of its role in the international division of labour'.³³ Thus Fordism has taken different forms in different countries with its development in Britain in particular being seen by some regulation theorists as 'flawed' and incomplete. As Jessop puts it:

The Keynesian welfare state [...] system provided the political shell and the organising myth in and through which a Fordist regime of sorts extended its hold over most parts of British society. The extension of Fordism in Britain was flawed at all three nodal points in the virtuous circle of mass production-high wages-mass consumption. Productivity did not increase to the same extent as in other countries; the Fordist wage relation was defective; and mass consumption was financed through demand management and the social wage as well as productivity increases.³⁴

Flawed or not, British Fordism involved a set of structural forms and a mode of regulation in which both public services and organised trade unionism played

³¹This is not to say, however, that regulationists regard 'the international' as unimportant. Jessop identifies four foci of regulation approaches: two international and two national. (Jessop (1990) *op. cit.* p161.) In my view, therefore, Joe Doherty oversimplifies Harris's arguments in locating regulation theory on the endogenous side of the 'false dichotomy' between endogenous and exogenous explanations for the decline of Britain in the international system. By moving between the abstract and the concrete in the way I have suggested, regulation theory clarifies which regulatory mechanisms are located at the national level and which at the international. (Harris *op. cit.*; Doherty J (1989) 'Britain in a changing international system' in Cochrane A and Anderson J (eds) *Politics in transition* (London: Sage) p9.)

³²The time may come when the mode of regulation for Britain operates predominantly at the European scale. That time, however, is not yet.

³³Jessop (1990) *op. cit.* p174.

³⁴Jessop B (1989) 'Conservative regimes in the transition to post-Fordism: the cases of Great Britain and West Germany' in Gottdiener M and Komninos N (eds) *Capitalist development and crisis theory: accumulation, regulation and spatial restructuring* (New York, NY: St Martin's)

key roles. Moreover both of these institutions were central to the crisis of Fordism. Indeed the character of public service trade unionism was forged in the crisis of Fordism, and this had important implications for its practices in the 1970s.

The public services and the trade unions under Fordism

Public services

The emergence of Fordism in Britain involved not only the increasing, though by no means universal, adoption of mass production techniques in the production of consumption goods, but also a specific set of political conditions. Foremost among these were social struggles between the two World Wars over demands for universal welfare provision, which was consolidated in the late 1940s with the election of the Atlee Government and the establishment of the welfare state. This arose autonomously from the adoption of new manufacturing technologies and forms of industrial organisation, but the two were related. Firstly, the (precarious) prosperity generated in the long Fordist boom provided the resources to extend state welfare to the whole population. Secondly, at the same time the social security system which was part of that welfare provision put a floor under working class consumption and thereby enabled it to continue even during periods of capitalist downturn, 'ironing out' dramatic fluctuations in capital accumulation.

In Britain many elements of the public services sector such as the health service and large parts of local government involve the direct state provision of services. Aglietta argues that in principle these services could be produced by capitalists (as in the United States) or provided by the state (as in Britain).

Furthermore:

[i]t is impossible to encompass the distribution between the two in any general law, since it varies considerably from one capitalist country to another [...] this should not be surprising since there are no use-values which are commodities by nature, nor others which are not. The commodity is a social relation of exchange, and its use-value only the support of this exchange. It can well happen therefore, that certain use-values that are not commodities under certain types of labour process and certain evolutionary logics of the mode of consumption become so at other periods [or other places] in capitalist

However,

[t]he labour process of Fordism, in fact, pushes to the limit the mechanical principle of work collectivization. This principle only proves effective in the repetitive long production runs of standardized commodities. It is totally inadequate for the production of collective services. Either these services are produced by capitalists with undeveloped methods, and their cost rises astronomically as the social demand for them rises. [...] Alternatively, these services are produced by public bodies.³⁶

Although state provision is also a drain on surplus value because of the consequent expansion of public expenditure, it is a drain on aggregate surplus value, not on the profitability of specific capitals rather than others. Thus if the production of collective services is unprofitable for individual capitals but there is a continuing political demand for them, capitalists in general may accept (albeit after a struggle) that those services should be provided by the state. The exact nature of this truce will depend on the existing state of social struggle and the assessment by capitalists of the costs involved. In Britain this is often referred to as the 'post-war settlement'. Once established, the state provision of collective services continues to be acceptable to (and in some respects functional for) capital for as long as accumulation continues notwithstanding the growth of public expenditure. The welfare state and the public services were thus key parts of the mode of regulation of the Fordist regime of accumulation in Britain.

Trade unions

Another crucial set of institutional relations within the 'mode of regulation' of Fordism were those relating to the organisation of labour. While collective bargaining arrangements and recognition agreements were never ubiquitous and while a large proportion of the workforce remained ununionised throughout the period, the concentration of union strength in key sectors and the impact of

³⁵Aglietta *op. cit.* pp165-166.

³⁶*Ibid.* p166. Note the crucial elements of political determination. The services must be produced by non-profit-oriented organisations if the social demand is to be met. The capitalist sector in Britain does not provide adequate health services in chronic geriatric medicine, for example, because it would not be profitable to do so.

unionisation on the wages and conditions of workers made trade unions a central part of the mode of regulation.

The dominant political strategy of the British trade union movement after the Second World War was that of labourism. That is, the existence of capitalist social relations were accepted, and the role of the unions was seen as gaining the most for labour within the parameters implied by that acceptance. The expression of these politics in the workplace was a trade off, in manufacturing at least, between unions and management. Labour accepted the prerogative of management to manage in exchange for steady real wage increases negotiated through 'free collective bargaining'. This acceptance lasted only as long as the steady wage increases were forthcoming. With the development of the crisis of Fordism from the 1960s onwards the shop stewards movement increasingly intervened in production as wage increases began to be curtailed. At the level of national politics the 'consensus' saw the emergence of a new 'corporatist' politics, as Colin Leys points out:

The key element in the new political order was the incorporation of the labour movement — both the trade unions and the Labour Party — into the state. From the time of the First World War, trade union leaders began to be accorded (however grudgingly, and as far as possible only symbolically) recognition as a legitimate and substantial political force. The terms of this recognition were that they should confine themselves to purely industrial questions and pursue 'industrial' aims 'responsibly': that is, that they should accept the legitimacy (and by implication the permanence) of the private ownership of industry. Similarly the Labour Party, emerging in 1923 as the second largest party in parliament, was entrusted with the government of Britain's privately owned economy — on condition that in office it showed no inclination to get rid of it.³⁷

Although Leys locates the origins of the consensus in the interwar years, it was not until the period after the Second World War that these relations became more fully developed. Trade union membership increased from 7.9 million to 10.3 million in the twenty years from 1945.³⁸ Of more significance for Fordism than sheer numbers of members, however, was the steady growth in collective

³⁷Leys C (1989, first edition 1983) *Politics in Britain* (London: Verso) p61.

³⁸Pelling H (1987, first edition 1963) *A history of British trade unionism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin) pp299-300.

bargaining. According to Coates and Topham, 'primitive' procedures for collective bargaining in the workplace existed from the early history of trade unionism in Britain,³⁹ but these were not developed into full national agreements until after 1945:

The Second World War gave a further impetus to the setting up of national negotiating machinery, fifty-six new Joint Industrial Councils being created during 1939-45. At the end of the war, the Acts which established the nationalized industries all contained clauses compelling the newly created authorities to set up negotiating machinery with the appropriate trade union. By 1946 already, some 15½ million workers in industrial and service occupations were covered by collective machinery or by statutory Wages Councils. Since the war, some 70 per cent of the working population have had their wages and working conditions regulated by these means.⁴⁰

The procedures for collective bargaining and the concomitant industrial strength of the trade unions were central to the operation of Fordism. By ensuring that the employed working class had a guaranteed level of income and one that could be expected to rise in real terms over time, the private sector was provided with a steady and potentially increasing market for its products and the ability (through the trade off described above) to control the production process and thus introduce technological change.⁴¹

Notwithstanding its important role in the mode of regulation, Fordist trade unionism was unevenly developed. Firstly, it was predominantly a trade unionism of manufacturing industry. Public services, as I have suggested, were not fully unionised until the 1970s, during the *crisis* of Fordism. Private services were never a major basis of trade unionism under Fordism. Secondly, it was overwhelmingly a trade unionism of men. This was not only a reflection of the fact that fewer women than men were in paid employment, but was a product too of the

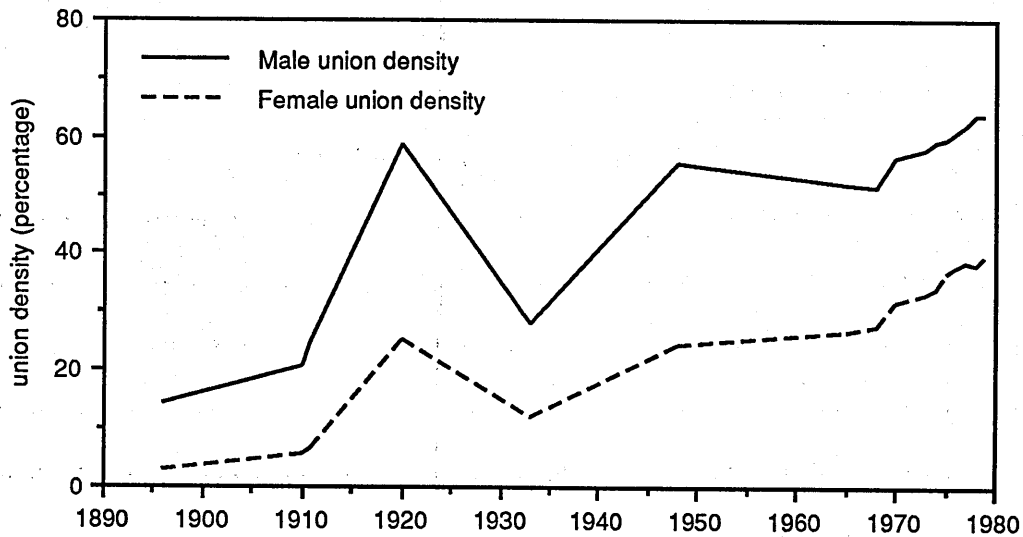
³⁹Coates and Topham *op. cit.* p175.

⁴⁰*Ibid.* p178.

⁴¹It was an aspect of the flaws in British Fordism that technological advancement was never used to the same extent to increase productivity as in some of Britain's industrial competitors. Some commentators have suggested that if the British trade unions had been stronger, then this would have forced British capital to modernise its plant more rapidly and would paradoxically have increased the effectiveness of British industry. See for example Harris L (1985) 'British capital: manufacturing, finance and multinational corporation' in Coates D, Johnston G and Bush R (eds) *A socialist anatomy of Britain* (Cambridge: Polity) p16.

lower union densities among women workers. Figure 2.1 shows the pattern of trade union membership over time disaggregated by sex.

Figure 2.1: Trade union membership by sex



Source: Hyman R (1985) 'Class struggle and the trade union movement' in Coates D, Johnston G and Bush R (eds) *A socialist anatomy of Britain* (Cambridge: Polity) p107.

The low levels of union membership among women reflect the patriarchal structures of Fordist trade unionism. Cockburn demonstrates graphically the complex links between class and gender relations in the printing industry which operated to exclude women from that bastion of trade union strength.⁴² Elsewhere, she has identified some of the causes of lower levels of trade union membership among women:

The 'density' of women's trade union membership [...] is still only 60 per cent that of men. This has often been read as a further indication that women are less politicised than men. There are, however, many sound explanations for women sometimes failing to join a union.⁴³

Among these explanations are the greater preponderance of casual and

⁴²Cockburn C (1983) *Brothers: male dominance and technological change* (London: Pluto).

⁴³Cockburn C (1987) 'Women, trade unions and political parties' *Fabian Research Series* 349 p6.

temporary employment among women, in which workers may question the usefulness of belonging to a union; the concentration of women in 'caring' jobs which might be seen as conflicting with possible industrial action; the domestic responsibilities of many women which make playing an active role in a union difficult; and the negligence of unions in failing to give priority to organising low-paid and unskilled workers.⁴⁴ Although some of these conditions could be overcome, they do account in part for the currently higher levels of trade unionism among men. However, male trade unionists themselves form part of the problem as well. Cockburn's research suggests that the image and practices of trade unionism have frequently expressed a masculinity which women workers can find unattractive, intimidating or both.⁴⁵ In subsequent chapters I will suggest that these gender relations may slowly be changing and that the stereotype of trade unionism discussed in Chapter One may be rather more appropriate to Fordism, than to its successor.

The political geography of British Fordism

I have already suggested that geography 'matters' because modes of regulation fragment along national lines. But there is also geographical differentiation *within* national modes of regulation. Within the economic sphere this has been a focus for the work of industrial geographers. Ray Hudson, for example, has shown how Fordist social relations were only developed to a very limited extent in the 'old industrial regions'.⁴⁶ Although geographers working outside the regulation approach have examined the uneven provision of public services,⁴⁷ what we might call the '*political geography of Fordism*' has not been considered in detail.

The characteristic political geography of British Fordism involved, among

⁴⁴*Ibid.* pp6-7.

⁴⁵*Ibid.* pp8-9.

⁴⁶Hudson *op. cit.*

⁴⁷See *inter alia* Mohan J (1988) 'Spatial aspects of health care employment in Britain: 1 Aggregate trends' *Environment and Planning A* 20:1 pp7-23.

many other things, the concentration of public services, and hence public service employment in areas of dense population growth. These were mostly the large cities with many jobs in manufacturing industry: the bastions of Fordist trade unionism. (There were also important areas of trade union strength in the 'old industrial regions' of the pre-Fordist period.) As manufacturing employment in these areas was reduced by industrial restructuring, including relocation to 'greenfield' sites, their employment structures became dominated by public service jobs. These workforces became increasingly unionised and enabled the labour movement to open up, albeit unintentionally, what we might call 'spaces for labour', at least as far as employment was concerned. On top of these employment structures, many consumption goods and services were provided by the public sector, most notably through large scale building of council houses and flats. Furthermore, local city councils were also usually controlled by the Labour Party, during a period when local authorities were subject to much less central control than was the case in the 1980s. All these factors combined with the result that many of these places did become 'public sector cities'.

Part of the process of restructuring of the public services sector during the 1980s, I will argue, can be seen as an attempt to reclaim these 'lost spaces' for private capital, while a succession of political carrots and sticks have been used to reclaim them politically for neo-liberal conservatism. In response to their continued domination by the Labour Party in the 1987 General Election Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher said of the inner cities, 'we want them too, next time'.⁴⁸

The crisis of Fordism

The causes of union growth and the nature of the trade unionism that was developed in the health service and local government during the 1970s are both related to the changing character of the welfare state. I have already shown that the

⁴⁸Gamble A (1988) 'On, and on, and on...?' *Marxism Today* November p14.

welfare state was an increasingly important source of membership for the trade union movement as a whole. In addition to this, it became one of the strategic sites of trade union action and struggle.

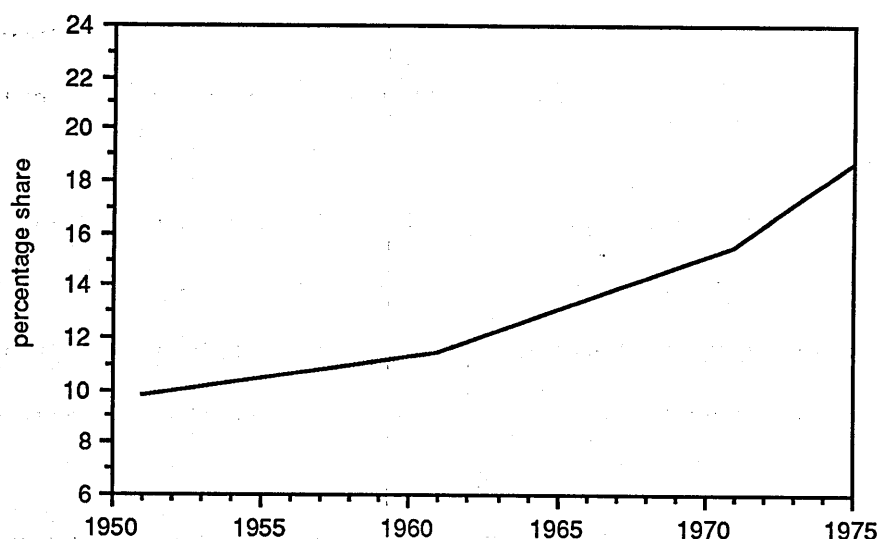
This occurred because the new trade unionism, represented particularly by the growth of NALGO and NUPE, was forged during the *crisis* of the welfare state. This had important implications for the sort of trade union practices which developed. Moreover the fact that the growth of the new unions happened at the same time as the emergence of a crisis in the welfare state was not simply a coincidence. Rather, the crisis was one of the causes of the growth of unionism as state employees tried to resist the ensuing restrictions on state spending. At the same time the form that the crisis took, and the sorts of policies which have been adopted in attempts to solve it, were influenced by the growth of trade unionism. Thus there was a complex interrelation between the development of the crisis and the concomitant development of public sector trade unionism. However the growth of unions was not the cause of the crisis. The roots of crisis lie in the nature of late capitalism in Britain.

In regulation theory, a crisis in the mode of regulation occurs when it can no longer regulate the contradictions of the system. In British Fordism, for example, the demand for universal welfare provision and access to public services eventually began to conflict with the continued accumulation of capital. The continual growth in demand for public services could only be sustained if their conditions of production enabled them to be produced more cheaply. The nature of Fordism set limits to accumulation. These led to a crisis in the mode of regulation.

One set of limits exists within the particular labour process which comes to dominate under the Fordist regime. This labour process, based on the automation of manufacturing production and the continual fragmentation of tasks, is also (somewhat confusingly) referred to as 'Fordism'. The perpetual transformation of the means of production which enables relative surplus value to be extracted

produces diminishing returns.⁴⁹ Firstly, increasing fragmentation of tasks lengthens the balance delay time. This is the time lost because of imbalances in the supply of components from one part of the production line to the next. Secondly, increased intensity of work and its routinised nature affect the physical and psychological capacities of the workers to fulfil the tasks. Thirdly, the link between the output of the individual worker and the collective output becomes more obscure. Aglietta argues that this reduces the ability of management to increase individual productivity through incentive bonuses. This means that while the regulation of the wage relation through collective bargaining implies rising real wages, there are limits to how far productivity can be increased to compensate.

Figure 2.2: Local authority expenditure as a share of GNP



Source: Gough I (1979) The political economy of the welfare state (London: Macmillan)

A second set of limits takes up the argument advanced earlier concerning the production of collective services. Aglietta argues that the development of the

⁴⁹Aglietta *op. cit.* pp119-22.

Fordist regime of accumulation saw a growth of demand for collective services. I have suggested that the political situation in Britain was such that these were largely provided by the state, through the establishment of the National Health Service and the expansion of local government. At the same time, the production of collective services was generally not amenable to the sorts of productivity increases provided in the capitalist sector by the mechanisation of production. Hence the cost of public service provision rose rapidly. Figure 2.2 shows the growth of expenditure by local government in Britain as a proportion of GNP over the period 1951-75.

This growth, coming on top of the limits to accumulation emerging in the production process, meant that the grudging acceptance by capital of the state provision of services eroded rapidly from the mid 1960s. Ultimately public expenditure represents the appropriation by the state of part of surplus value. Once growth in the extraction of relative surplus value faltered because of the limits to accumulation mentioned above, the state encountered increasing resistance from capital in its financing of collective services. Gough provides evidence of this in the case of Britain. Total state expenditure grew rapidly as a proportion of GNP from 42.1% in 1961 to 50.3% in 1971 and 57.9% in 1975. By contrast, state revenue (which kept pace with this growth during the 1960s) actually fell as a proportion of GNP from 48.6% in 1971 to 46.6% in 1975.⁵⁰ This meant that the public sector borrowing requirement grew from 1.7% of GNP in 1971 to 11.3% in 1975.

Thus there is a set of contradictions at the heart of the Fordist regime of accumulation, which resulted during the 1970s in the development of the sort of crisis I outlined above. Specifically, the continued accumulation of capital was restricted by the very political and social forms which originally permitted it. One of the key contradictions of Fordism is that between the political demand for continual growth in public services on the one hand, and the requirement that the

⁵⁰Gough I (1979) *The political economy of the welfare state* (London: Macmillan) p77.

cost of the reproduction of labour power be continually reduced on the other. Given that Fordist production methods are not suited to reducing the cost of many public services at a rate which compensates for the growth in demand, the provision of those services becomes one of the central elements in the crisis of the mode of regulation characteristic of Fordism.

In addition, attempts by the state to reduce the costs of public services within the Fordist mode of regulation come up against the collective bargaining procedures which are one of the defining features of Fordism. These procedures are backed up by the power of state employees organised in trade unions. For as long as the state is willing to preserve and sanction institutionalised collective bargaining within the public service sector it will be difficult to hold down the cost of public services. However, threats to these structures by government may well bring more members into membership of the labour movement. This is precisely what happened in Britain during the 1970s when public service trade unionism expanded in the way I have described.

Public service trade unionism and the crisis

I have shown that the structures of public service provision which were established in Britain after the Second World War were founded on a series of contradictions. These contradictions developed over time until they threatened the reproduction of those structures. This constituted a crisis of the welfare state, which could only be resolved by a qualitative transformation in the 'mode of regulation'. However, as I shall discuss in detail in Chapter Three, the elements of a possible resolution to the crisis were slow to emerge. Thus the crisis developed throughout the 1970s with a concomitant growth of public service trade unionism described above.

The fact that this growth occurred at the same time as the crisis was not purely coincidental. Firstly, because the crisis of the welfare state was a crisis of the mode of regulation itself, public services became a strategic site for trade union struggle. This was because once the reproduction of the mode of regulation is

threatened, the nature of its replacement is determined by social and political struggles. However, it is not necessarily the case that the protagonists in the struggles are fully conscious of this. Thus to show that the public services became a strategic site for struggle is not to imply that trade unionists necessarily occupied that site. It is logically possible for such opportunities to be missed. On the other hand, state attempts to solve or ameliorate the crisis of the welfare state after 1975 largely involved placing downward pressure on public expenditure. Most resource expenditure in the welfare state goes to pay the wages of state employees. According to Ian Gough wages accounted for 31 percent of UK social expenditure.⁵¹ If transfer payments are excluded the proportion is 54%. Thus placing 'downward pressure on public expenditure' is very likely to involve attempts to limit the state wage bill, either by shedding labour, or by limiting wage increases.

In addition, the state attempted to shift the balance of political forces away from labour through legislative and other changes. During the seventies there was no wholesale attack on the system of collective bargaining in the public services, indeed as Beaumont shows, the high union densities in the public sector were partly a result of employer encouragement for collective bargaining and union membership.⁵² However, there were a number of changes which prefigured developments which would follow in the 1980s. Most notable was the 1971 Industrial Relations Act. Taken together, the limitations on public expenditure and state attempts to alter the framework of industrial relations legislation ensured that trade unionists in the public sector and elsewhere were indeed involved in struggles throughout the 1970s, regardless of whether they saw them as being of strategic importance to the future of public service provision or not.

By contrast with the Industrial Relations Act introduced by the Heath

⁵¹*Ibid.* p84.

⁵²Beaumont PB (1987) *The decline of trade union organisation* (Beckenham: Croom Helm) p149.

government, the 'social contract' between 1975 and 1977 was partly an attempt by the Labour administration to deal with the crisis of public service provision through an agreement with the union leadership to limit wage rises. However as Gough argues, this could not resolve the contradictions of the welfare state.⁵³ Although the leadership and to some extent the bureaucracy of the labour movement could be incorporated temporarily, the policy of limiting wage increases led to an upsurge in grassroots trade unionism.

These developments led to the dramatic growth of public sector trade unionism already noted. Furthermore, the resulting increases in levels of industrial unrest influenced the fate of successive attempts to solve the crisis within the existing structures of public service provision (and consequently also the course of the crisis itself). In other words, the nature of public sector trade unionism during the 1970s was bound up in the development of the very crisis which led to its growth in the first place.

The average number of working days lost in strikes each year from 1960 to 1969 was 3.6 million. The figure for the years 1970 to 1979 was 12.9 million.⁵⁴ Much of this increase was accounted for by the militancy of public service trade unionism during the 1970s. In manufacturing industry increased grassroots unrest found expression in the shop stewards' movement and in the public service sector unions during the 1970s the growth of membership was also simultaneously a growth of workplace organisation. Taylor recounts that union stewards only gained employer recognition in local government and the health service in 1969. From then on

the steward system spread rapidly through NUPE. In 1970, 38 per cent of the union's branches had no stewards at all, while 21 per cent had five or more. By 1974 only 11 per cent of branches said they had no union stewards and the proportion with five or more had grown to nearly half.⁵⁵

⁵³Gough *op. cit.* pp146-152.

⁵⁴Pelling *op. cit.*

⁵⁵Taylor *op. cit.* p213.

In 1974 NUPE commissioned a report on its organisation from Warwick University. The 'Warwick report' as it is known recommended a considerable strengthening of rank and file organisation. Because its members are concentrated in the lowest paid jobs in the public services, NUPE was at the forefront of the struggle to resist attempts by the state to retrench public expenditure through wage restraint: 'NUPE was the main militant union defending the social wage and public expenditure from attack since the mid-1970s'.⁵⁶ Although the public services were in crisis, there was no attempt to transform radically the way they were provided; rather the emphasis was on cost. Because of the nature of this attack, the central concern for all the public service sector unions during the 1970s was the struggle to maintain the level of wages.

This culminated in 1978 and 1979 in a series of strikes throughout the public sector against the government's attempts to limit pay rises to five per cent. The significance of this continual emphasis on wage demands, albeit prosecuted in a radical manner, is that it was essentially defensive. Furthermore, reliance on the strike weapon in welfare and environmental services involves putting pressure directly on the users of services, and only indirectly on the employers. If public sector services became a strategic site of union struggle in the second half of the 1970s, the tactics of that struggle were drawn largely from the traditional union armoury of economic demands and the withdrawal of labour. A former NUPE branch secretary described it thus:

then [in the 1970s] it was just 'we're workers and all workers produce something which other people use, and there is no difference between us and the people who make plastic boxes. When they go on strike the assembly line comes to a halt and that is something that people have to live with'.⁵⁷

That is not to say that such tactics were unsuccessful. Indeed the 'dirty jobs' strike of 1978-9 led to an eventual pay settlement in the region of ten per cent,

⁵⁶*Ibid.* p352.

⁵⁷Interview with the author, 16 January 1990.

compared with the government's five per cent limit. Indeed the very success of the unions' resistance ensured that the crisis of public service provision could not be resolved within the existing mode of regulation. It is in this sense that the development of a relatively militant public sector trade unionism during the 1970s influenced the course of the crisis. At the same time, because the crisis was expressed as government attempts to restrain public spending, and specifically public sector pay increases, the trade union militancy was expressed largely as a defence of real wages in the public services. The practices of trade unionism which developed at this time, particularly in the large cities, might be characterised as a form of syndicalism, especially once the leadership of the labour movement had been incorporated through the social contract.

There were a number of attempts to go beyond traditional economism. Best known in the manufacturing sector (and therefore outside the public services) was the Lucas plan produced by shop stewards at Lucas aerospace. This proposed that instead of making workers redundant, their skills and resources should be put into socially-useful production. This sort of prefigurative activity by trade unionists gets away from the purely defensive demands which were the normal union response to management proposals for rationalisation. Wainwright and Elliott point out that

[s]uch a defensive stand has often been the only way to defend jobs, but in the long run it is hopeless in industries like the car industry where the market for the type of cars being produced is virtually saturated. Workers' plans are in effect proposing a form of restructuring, but a restructuring in the interests of labour rather than capital.⁵⁸

Although such plans were the exception rather than the rule the principle they demonstrate is important. In the public service sector they found their echo in the growing politicisation of some of the major unions. The health service unions, for example, campaigned against pay-beds in National Health Service hospitals.⁵⁹

⁵⁸Wainwright H and Elliott D (1982) *The Lucas plan: a new trade unionism in the making* (London: Allison and Busby) p245.

⁵⁹Taylor *op.cit.* p345.

Generally however such developments were limited to conference resolutions and publicity campaigns, rather than the prefigurative approach which was seen at Lucas.

Possible futures: there was an alternative

Thus the growth of public service unionism in Britain was a product of and an influence on the development of the crisis in the provision of public services. State attempts to resolve this crisis within the existing mode of regulation were unsuccessful, partly because of union resistance, including importantly at the grassroots. However this tended towards a trade unionism based on the economistic defence of wages. The strategic potential of the situation was (understandably) not widely perceived and there were therefore few attempts to develop prefigurative union practices which might have promoted a 'restructuring for labour'.

It is, however, important to bear in mind that the establishment of a new mode of regulation is not predestined. Times of crises and transformation are times of experimentation, in which the processes of social struggle endemic to capitalist societies take on a crucial significance. If new institutional forms can be fought for and developed then the character of any resolution of the crisis is up for grabs. The crisis of the mode of regulation could have been the opportunity for a strategic restructuring for labour.

The election of the Thatcher government in May 1979, however, was to be the start of an attempt to bring about just such a strategic restructuring, but in the interests of capital, rather than labour. As I have suggested, the outcome of this restructuring would be the result of social and political struggle, including trade union struggle. For the public service unions the starting point for this struggle was the practices developed during the 1970s. These were soon to be tested.

3 Thatcherism, public services and the unions: a new 'mode of regulation'?

Introduction

The interrelationship between the practices of public service trade unionism and the crisis of the welfare state continued to develop into the following decade. In contrast to the 1970s, however, the period after 1979 was a particularly difficult one for the trade unions, including those in the public sector.

The Conservative government which came to power in May of that year sought not merely to manage the crisis, as previous governments had done, but to resolve it. What is more, both the trade union movement and the public sector were key targets of the new policies. The trade unions' responses to these attacks form the central focus of this study, and in this chapter I want to consider the sources of the attacks and the nature of the shift which occurred in 1979, and relate them to the regulation approach introduced in Chapter Two. Drawing particularly on the work of Jessop and his collaborators, I will consider how the policies and practical strategies of the Conservative government during the 1980s are related to the transition from Fordism and the possible emergence of a successor 'mode of regulation', post-Fordism.

The distinctiveness of Thatcherism

The nature of Thatcherism and the extent to which 1979 should be seen as a political turning point or discontinuity were topics of fevered debate on the left during the 1980s. Some denied that the concept of 'Thatcherism' had any relevance. Tony Benn wrote:

I believe [...] that all this talk of Thatcher and Thatcherism is a diversion and that, as socialists, we must be much more analytical than that. For what is really happening is

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much more deep-seated. A decaying British capitalism is being forced by its own internal pressures, or contradictions, to withdraw the gains that it could afford to concede to working people during the post-war boom.¹

Others insisted on the uniqueness and novelty of Thatcherism. Among these was Stuart Hall, who focussed particularly on its ideological aspects. Hall's writings have sometimes been read as implying that Thatcherism is *principally* an ideological phenomenon, or even as underwriting a more general ideological determinism.² I believe both of these to be misreadings. Hall states that it is impossible either to conceptualise or to achieve 'hegemony' without 'the decisive nucleus of economic activity'.³ However, Hall's argument is based on the premise that there is no simple correspondence between this 'decisive nucleus' and ideology. He stresses that ideology has its own rhythm of development and its own effectivity, and that just as ideological constructions have material conditions of existence, so material changes and policy initiatives have ideological conditions of existence.

Hall argues that Thatcherism should be seen as a hegemonic project, which seeks to combine an authoritarian and interventionist social policy ('Victorian values', an emphasis on 'traditional' family life, a restricted role for women and so on) with a neo-liberal approach to economic policy (deregulation,

¹Benn T (1985) 'Who dares wins' *Marxism Today* January p13.

²See for example Hall S (1983) 'The great moving right show' in Hall S and Jacques M (eds) *The politics of Thatcherism* (London: Lawrence and Wishart) pp19-39. For a critique of Hall's concept of 'authoritarian populism' see Jessop B, Bonnett K, Bromley S and Ling T (1984) 'Authoritarian populism, two nations and Thatcherism' *New Left Review* 147 pp32-60. The ensuing debate is contained in Hall S (1985) 'Authoritarian populism: a reply to Jessop et al.' *New Left Review* 151 pp115-124; and Jessop B, Bonnett K, Bromley S and Ling T (1985) 'Thatcherism and the politics of hegemony: a reply to Stuart Hall' *New Left Review* 153 pp87-101. Hall's analyses have been closely associated with the journal *Marxism Today*, whose earlier focus on Thatcherism has now widened to a more general concern with the character of 'New Times'. Jessop *et al.* also criticise the treatment of Thatcherism in the 'New Times' analysis. See *Marxism Today*, October 1988; Jessop B, Bonnett K and Bromley S (1990) 'Farewell to Thatcherism? Neo-liberalism and "New Times"' *New Left Review* 179 pp81-102; and Leys C (1990) 'Still a question of hegemony' *New Left Review* 181 pp119-128. Three collections collate much of this material: Hall S (1988) *The hard road to renewal: Thatcherism and the crisis of the left* (London: Verso); Jessop B, Bonnett K, Bromley S and Ling T (1988) *Thatcherism: a tale of two nations* (Cambridge: Polity); Hall S and Jacques M (eds) (1989) *New Times: the changing face of politics in the 1990s* (London: Lawrence and Wishart).

³Hall (1985) *op. cit.* p120.

internationalisation and 'free markets'). For Hall, Thatcherism's ability to exploit the contradictions between these positions is one source of its dynamism and resilience:

[Thatcherism] managed, by the end of the 1970s, to identify itself with 'the people' ... Its novelty lies, in part, in the success with which this 'populist' appeal was then orchestrated with the imposition of authority and order. It managed to marry the gospel of free market liberalism with organic patriotic Toryism. 'Free market, strong state, iron times': an authoritarian populism.⁴

Gamble notes the same contradictory right-wing traditions within Thatcherism, and stresses the paradoxes in many 'New Right' positions.⁵ Like Hall, Gamble organises his analysis around the concept of 'hegemony'. He argues that 'Thatcherism should be seen as an attempt to clear the way for a new hegemony, not as that new hegemony itself',⁶ since the establishment of true hegemony would involve the regime gaining the sort of popular legitimacy which has so far eluded it.⁷ Gamble's account is deliberately more wide-ranging than Hall's, in that it is not restricted to the ideological aspects of Thatcherism. He argues that the concept of hegemony provides the sharpest analytical toolkit because it 'allows proper weight to be given to ideology, economics and politics'.⁸

For Gamble, the promotion and implementation of a particular accumulation strategy (Hall's decisive nucleus) is integral to any hegemonic project.⁹ His description of Thatcherism's accumulation strategy is based broadly on the regulationist account of the crisis of Fordism, but he argues that the 'shape of the new regime of accumulation is very unclear'.¹⁰

Bob Jessop has provided some clarification. Jessop's account is much more

⁴Hall S and Jacques M (1983) 'Introduction' in Hall S and Jacques M (eds) *The politics of Thatcherism* (London: Lawrence and Wishart) p10.

⁵See Gamble A (1988) *The free economy and the strong state* (London: Macmillan) especially pp27-60.

⁶*Ibid.* p236.

⁷*Ibid.* p237.

⁸*Ibid.* p25.

⁹*Ibid.* p24.

¹⁰*Ibid.* p230.

closely integrated with regulation theory, and he and his collaborators are also more critical of Hall's approach than is Gamble. However it will be useful to consider his ideas in some detail since (in contrast to many writings in the regulation school) they deal with the specifics of the British case and also extend the regulation approach to the political sphere in a fairly sophisticated fashion. Jessop's arguments stress both the plurality of possible political forms in the transition from Fordism, and the close relationship between state activity and the crisis of Fordism and the emergence of any new 'regime of accumulation' and 'mode of regulation'.

The politics of transition

Those sceptical of the distinctiveness of 'Thatcherism' have pointed out that this programme was not entirely new. A number of the policies pursued by the Thatcher government had been on the political agenda for some time. Public expenditure cuts had been introduced by the Labour government under pressure from the IMF in 1976, and the Conservative administration which came to power in 1970 under the leadership of Edward Heath was committed to some of the radical policies which would later form part of the Thatcher project:

[T]he new monetarist, nationalist, racist rejection of the post-war consensus which [Enoch] Powell expressed found a deep response on the authoritarian right wing of the party. These currents converged with Heath's more limited 'competition policy' at a pre-election strategy conference in the Selsdon Park Hotel in Croydon in January 1970 which committed the party to many of the 'new right' policies, including the abolition of universal social security payments and legislation to curtail trade union powers.¹¹

Leys argues that one thing that was new about the 1979 election was that 'for the first time the leadership of a major party was committed to a project which went to the heart of the relationship between labour and capital'.¹² In other words, while Heath had been elected on a radical right programme he had failed to carry through its implementation. It is in this sense that the Thatcher programme represented a potential resolution of the crisis identified in Chapter Two. This forms the starting

¹¹Leys C (1989) *Politics in Britain* (London: Verso) p89.

¹²*Ibid.* p101.

point for Jessop's characterisation of Thatcherism as a potential 'mid-wife to post-Fordism'.¹³

Regulation theory emphasises that the emergence of a new regime of accumulation and mode of regulation is the result of social and political struggles, and that therefore there is not only one possible resolution of the crisis of Fordism. However, this does not imply that there are unlimited possible resolutions. As Leborgne and Lipietz put it, 'to be a serious candidate for "the way out of crisis", any new model of development must be practical'.¹⁴ Firstly, assuming that capitalism survives the crisis (which is itself not inevitable) any new forms must be compatible with the defining features of the capitalist mode of production, such as the wage relation, the extraction of profit and the private ownership of the means of production. Secondly, national variations in specific pre-existing institutional forms make some sorts of resolution more likely in some countries than others, and some sorts of resolution impossible.

In Chapter Two I outlined how the crisis of Fordism was generated. To recap briefly, the Keynesian welfare state (including the public services sector) was integral to the temporary stabilisation of processes of capital accumulation which constituted the Fordist regime of accumulation. However the costs of providing public services to the level determined by the post-war political settlement escalated rapidly, while at the same time productivity growth in the capitalist sector faltered as a result of inherent rigidities in the production process and the impracticality of extending Fordist mechanisation to the service sector. Aglietta's original analysis did not consider possible ways out of the ensuing crisis in detail, but the general conditions for a resolution can be discerned. Referring to the United States, Aglietta writes that:

the only avenue of escape from the crisis is one in accordance with the law of accumulation that is the kernel of the capitalist mode of production. For this to be successful, the

¹³Jessop B (1986) 'Thatcherism's mid-life crisis' *New Socialist* March pp11-15, ref: p12.

¹⁴Leborgne D and Lipietz A (1988) 'New technologies, new modes of regulation: some spatial

system must engender new conditions of production and exchange capable of accomplishing a lasting and massive rise in the rate of surplus-value.¹⁵

The necessary conditions for this, according to Aglietta, include the following:

1 The development of 'Neo-Fordist' production techniques, replacing 'the mechanical principle of fragmented labour disciplined by hierarchical direction with the informational principle of work organized in semi-autonomous groups, disciplined by the direct constraint of production itself'.¹⁶ These techniques are based on microprocessor technologies and include the numerical control of manufacturing processes, computerised design, 'total quality control', just-in-time stock management and vastly increased information storage and handling capacities.

2 The application of these techniques to capitalist commodity production where they confer 'a new and notable flexibility on the labour process',¹⁷ thereby overcoming some of the limits to accumulation under Fordism generated by rigidities in the labour process.

3 The application of these techniques to the production of what Aglietta refers to as 'the means of collective consumption' (which in the case of Britain includes the public services sector). According to Aglietta the production of these services using the methods characteristic of Fordism is not feasible, but some Neo-Fordist methods can successfully be applied.¹⁸ Thus the service sector can in principle benefit from the sorts of productivity increases only possible under Fordism in the mass production sectors of manufacturing.

4 The withdrawal of the state from the direct production of the 'means of collective consumption', thereby simultaneously reducing the drain on profitability

implications' *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 6 pp263-80, ref: p263.

¹⁵ Aglietta M (1979) *A theory of capitalist regulation: the US experience* (London: Verso) p167.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p167.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* p168.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p167.

generated by an expanding public services sector and enabling private capital to exploit the new source of accumulation provided by the Neo-Fordist methods.¹⁹

The perspective of the regulation approach is firstly that these developments will not occur inevitably, that they are not inscribed in the 'logic of capital' and secondly that a complete resolution of the crisis must involve all of them. This implies that the mechanisms which actually produce the transition must be sought in the processes of struggle bound up with the crisis of Fordism. Further, the concrete institutional forms taken by the new regime cannot be straightforwardly read-off from the abstract analyses in Aglietta's account.

Leborgne and Lipietz point out that there is no necessary relationship between the adoption of flexible production systems and flexibility in the wage contract, such as that provided by the increased use of part-time, temporary or subcontracted labour.²⁰ They identify three possible reorganisations of the labour process related to the adoption of the new technologies ('deskilling', 'individual involvement' and 'collective involvement')²¹ and two general forms of the wage contract, 'rigid' and 'flexible'. In principle, they argue, this provides six possible wage contract/labour process combinations, although at least one of these (collective involvement and flexible contracts) seems to them to be contradictory. While their work exemplifies the plurality of possible paths out of the crisis of Fordism, Leborgne and Lipietz are not concerned to identify the alternative political arrangements which are compatible with various possible new regimes, nor the political mechanisms through which the transition is taking place.

The importance of Jessop's work lies in its attempt to relate the shift from Fordism to the changing institutional and political circumstances of Britain in the 1980s. His initial characterisation of Thatcherism was developed in the context of his debate with Hall, and while it was essentially compatible with the tenets of

¹⁹*Ibid.* p385.

²⁰Leborgne and Lipietz *op. cit.*

²¹*Ibid.* p270.

regulation theory it is not linked to it explicitly. By 1986, however, Jessop was centrally concerned with the problems of theorising the welfare state in the transition from Fordism, and relating this to an emerging Thatcherite accumulation strategy for a re-invigorated post-Fordist capitalism.²²

As in his earlier work on state theory,²³ Jessop emphasises that there can be no theory of 'the' capitalist state. 'At most', he writes, 'one could provide a theoretically-informed, historically-based account of the forms, functions, and dynamics of specific welfare states in more or less circumscribed conjunctures.'²⁴ However, he argues that it is possible to identify 'two main forms of political response to the crisis of Fordism'²⁵ with differing consequences for welfare state policy. These are the neo-liberal response and the neo-statist response.²⁶ In a subsequent account he adds a third form, the neo-corporatist.²⁷ These types are not intended as complete descriptions of actual state forms under post-Fordism, but should rather be regarded as 'poles around which different national solutions will develop during an extended period of conflict and experimentation'.²⁸

The neo-liberal form involves a 'market-guided transition to post-Fordism'.²⁹ The public sector will undergo a combination of privatisation and liberalisation with commercial criteria introduced to the remaining state sector. The private sector will see deregulation and the establishment of a new legal and political basis for economic activity promoting a highly flexible labour market, 'management's right to manage' and the exclusion of organised labour from decision making.

The neo-statist approach involves extensive state intervention to promote

²²See Jessop (1986) 'Thatcherism's mid-life crisis' *op. cit.*; Jessop B (1989) 'Thatcherism: the British road to post-Fordism' *Essex Papers in Politics and Government* 68; and Jessop B (1986) 'Der Wohlfahrtsstaat im Übergang vom Fordismus zum Postfordismus' *Prokla* 65 pp4-33. I am grateful to Bob Jessop for providing me with an English translation of the latter.

²³Jessop B (1982) *The capitalist state* (Oxford: Blackwell).

²⁴Jessop (1986) 'Der Wohlfahrtsstaat ...' *op. cit.* p4.

²⁵*Ibid.* p23.

²⁶*Ibid.* pp23-26.

²⁷Jessop (1989) 'Thatcherism: the British road ...' *op. cit.* p25.

²⁸Jessop (1986) 'Der Wohlfahrtsstaat ...' *op. cit.* p23.

²⁹Jessop (1989) 'Thatcherism: the British road ...' *op. cit.* p25.

'state-sponsored' flexible accumulation. Its features would include flexible skilling in the labour market, rather than flexible pricing and contracts, decommodification, the state promotion of sunrise industries to 'ensure the dynamic efficiency of the industrial core'.³⁰

The neo-corporatist strategy would extend the corporatist framework of Fordism beyond the organisations of capital and labour to 'other policy communities' such as 'science, health, education, policing'.³¹ It would shift the emphasis of corporatist activity away from the national level to the regional and local levels. The role of the state would be to underwrite the decisions of corporatist institutions rather than 'disengage' (neo-liberal) or 'intervene' (neo-statist).

In Jessop's view these three forms are all compatible with the resolution of the crisis of Fordism, but different types are more likely to be adopted by some countries than others, given the existing national variations in political situations, institutional arrangements, the character of Fordism and its crisis and the result of social and political struggles. Further, countries may combine elements of the various types, though 'an effective transition will probably rest on the dominance of one or other strategic line'.³²

For Jessop, Thatcherism represents an attempt by the state to secure the conditions for following a broadly neo-liberal path to post-Fordism. He argues that the institutional organisation of the British economy had proved too rigid even to exploit Fordism fully let alone move smoothly to a post-Fordist mode of growth predicated as it would be on increasing flexibility. Moreover, the British state had proved itself unable to break down those rigidities, as evidenced by the events of the 1960s and 1970s. Thatcherism, therefore, is seen as an attempt to overcome this impasse by restructuring the state to provide it with the capacity to act against

³⁰*Ibid.* p26.

³¹*Ibid.* p25.

³²*Ibid.* p26.

the barriers to accumulation.³³ Jessop stresses that this does not mean that Thatcherism will succeed in reforming the state in this way, nor that it will continue to pursue a post-Fordist future even if it does.

Thatcherism, therefore, is not (as some of its political supporters claim) a rolling-back of the state as such, but a removal or marginalisation of the structures of crisis management established under the crisis of Fordism and their replacement with strong powers to act on the supply side of the economy to promote (a particular form of) post-Fordist accumulation. Jessop argues that just as the state intervened extensively in the period of post-war reconstruction to establish the conditions for Fordism, disengaged somewhat during the successful phase of Fordism in the 1950s and early 1960s and then began to act strongly again in the crisis, so it may be expected that the state would be closely involved in the establishment of any new regime, only rolling itself back (if possible and/or necessary) once strong accumulation is established.³⁴

The key features of Thatcherism's neo-liberal approach identified by Jessop are liberalisation, deregulation, privatisation, (re-)commodification and internationalisation. These constitute Thatcherism's accumulation strategy and do not provide a complete account of its nature, since they neglect issues of hegemony, legitimation, state form and the social bases of Thatcherism. In particular I have not discussed Jessop's characterisation of Thatcherism as a 'two nations' political project. This is clearly related both to the accumulation strategy (for example through its emphasis on price-flexibility of labour) and to the effect of such a strategy on the public services sector. Jessop's argument is that the politics of support and social bases of Thatcherism enable it to neglect the 'second nation' or 'have nots' and provide merely a minimum level of means-tested social security.

³³*Ibid.* pp17-18.

³⁴*Ibid.* pp19-20.

Thatcherism, post-Fordism and public services

The accumulation strategy of Thatcherism has profound implications for both the public services sector and the trade unions. I have already indicated the central place accorded to the public services sector by Aglietta in his specification of the conditions for a resolution of the crisis of Fordism. Within the neo-liberal strategy pursued by Thatcherism the reduction of costs within the public services seems to involve spending cuts, privatisation, partial re-commodification and the introduction of commercial criteria to their production and distribution. There appears to be only limited emphasis on the introduction of new technologies either to reduce costs or to enable the profitable transfer of production to the private sector. However there are some signs of this. Paul Hoggett argues that the use of information technology in local government is enabling (if not necessarily producing) a shift to a Neo-Fordist form of work organisation.³⁵ In the services with which this study is most directly concerned, it is notable that private sector companies based in continental Europe which are seeking to gain a foothold in the local government service sector frequently do so on the basis of their innovative approach to technology. By contrast some UK companies put more emphasis (at least in practice) on straightforward intensification of an existing labour process. Jessop himself identifies a number of areas where Neo-Fordist techniques could radically transform the public service sector. The use of information technology most clearly enables productivity increases in services which can be computerised easily, such as the cash benefits payments system. However he also suggests that it will allow more better information storage (of patients records for example), more efficient catering, electronic diagnostics, the use of expert systems, distance learning through telecommunications.³⁶ According to Jessop, 'where a political

³⁵Hoggett P (1987) 'A farewell to mass production? Decentralisation as an emergent private and public sector paradigm' in Hoggett P and Hambleton R (eds) *Decentralisation and democracy: localising public services* (Bristol: School of Advanced Urban Studies) pp215-232.

³⁶Jessop (1986) 'Der Wohlfahrtsstaat ...' *op. cit.* pp27-8.

coalition has emerged favouring privatisation and retrenchment, these innovations can be exploited to expand private sector provision alongside a residual welfare state'.³⁷

For the public services, then, liberalisation, which involves the promotion of free market competition, may be seen in the insistence that NHS ancillary and local government services be subject to compulsory competitive tendering. Deregulation is exemplified by the policy of allowing private bus companies to provide services on the same routes as public sector organisations. The NHS reforms also contain elements of deregulation in the proposal for self-governing hospitals and the local management of schools fall in the same category. Privatisation is seen in the activities of some local councils, and may also be a product of liberalisation. The sale of state assets such as the water, gas and electricity services are further examples. Re-commodification of the residual state sector may be seen in the use of market proxies in education and the internal market policy for the NHS and the increase in user fees (ranging from prescription charges to council swimming pool entrance). Internationalisation is exhibited in the public services by the foreign direct investment in water companies and the local government service sector.

Thatcherism, post-Fordism and trade unions

This Thatcherite strategy also has profound implications for the trade union movement. I showed in Chapter Two how the development of trade unions in the public services sector was closely related to the crisis of Fordism. The relatively militant trade union action during the late 1970s, particularly in the public services sector, was used as an excuse by the incoming government to implement a series of draconian legislative measures against trade unions. Although, according to Jessop, it was not until the mid 1980s that Thatcherism gained the status of an 'increasingly coherent economic strategy',³⁸ the targeting of trade unions in the

³⁷*Ibid.* p28.

³⁸Jessop (1986) 'Thatcherism's mid-life crisis' *op. cit.* p11.

early 1980s is compatible with the neo-liberal strategy, even if this was not the original intention.

First, many of the gains the unions had achieved during the Fordist period in terms of their legal status were unilaterally withdrawn, with the result that the judiciary became much more heavily involved in industrial relations matters than had previously been the case. Second, the monetarist policies of the first Thatcher administration intensified the national impact of the international recession. Again, while these policies did not at the time constitute a coherent accumulation strategy in Jessop's sense, they nonetheless generated very high levels of unemployment with the effect of both reducing the membership strength of many unions (though this was less true for those in the public sector) and exerting pressures on collective bargaining arrangements as unions became less able to hold out for index-linked wage rises. Third, direct battles with some of the key labour movement institutions were provoked and mostly won by the government. The foremost example was the miners' strike of 1984-5, for which the government prepared over a period of years, and during which they eschewed the opportunity of settling the dispute through compromise, insisting on holding out for complete victory.

If fully implemented, the Thatcherite neo-liberal strategy would probably require a much reduced role for a smaller trade union movement, organising some of the so-called 'core workforce' and leaving the periphery largely to the 'free play of market forces'. The new model unions in this scenario are exemplified by the EETPU³⁹ electricians union under the leadership of Eric Hammond. The sort of practices implied by this form of trade unionism could include the establishment of single-union, no-strike deals struck on the basis that the interests of capital and labour are essentially identical. The idea that what is good for the company is good for its employees is the cornerstone of 'business unionism'. Other characteristics might be a shift to plant-level, or even individual, pay bargaining, with the unions'

³⁹Electrical, Electronic, Telecommunications and Plumbing Union.

role restricted to that of a latter-day friendly society providing cheap insurance and credit cards to its membership.

There is little evidence that such a trade unionism is emerging in any but the most limited fashion. Most surveys of workplace level industrial relations suggest that continuity is more evident than change.⁴⁰ This could potentially lead to more concerted government action to try and shift industrial relations in its desired direction, though this does not currently seem to be a policy priority. Furthermore, if there is little evidence of widespread change in the private sector, the same is true *a fortiori* of the public services. While the government has been able to hold public sector pay awards below the rate of inflation through the imposition of cash limits, it has not been able significantly to alter the industrial relations practices of the public sector in tune with the neo-liberal strategy, although its encouragement of local-level wage bargaining suggests it would very much like to.

However this does not imply that the trade unions have not altered their practices during the 1980s, merely that on the whole they have not changed them to suit the Thatcherite strategy ('new realism' notwithstanding).⁴¹ This is hardly surprising given the highly restricted role the neo-liberal strategy implies for trade unionism. However, as I shall seek to show in succeeding chapters, the unions (at least in the local government sector) have generated a variety of creative responses to the government's attempts to pursue such a strategy, and produced a number of transformations in the practices of trade unionism which may well be consonant with some transitions to post-Fordism, but could cause considerable problems for the Thatcherite one.

⁴⁰MacInnes J (1987) *Thatcherism at work* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press); Kelly J (1989) 'British trade unionism 1979-89: change continuity and contradictions' paper delivered to the *Work, Employment and Society Conference*, Durham, 14-15 September; Millward N and Stevens M (1986) *British workplace industrial relations 1980-84* (Aldershot: Gower).

Thatcherism and local government

The restrictions on the public sector implied by the neo-liberal strategy are reflected in Thatcherite policies towards local government. Allan Cochrane identifies three main trends. These are changes to the system of local government finance, the growth of non-elected local government and tendencies towards the privatisation of services.⁴¹ These empirically identifiable trends are compatible both with the neo-liberal strategy (combined to a degree with neo-corporatism) and with the (as yet unrealised) Thatcherite vision for local government spelt out by Nicholas Ridley under the label of the 'enabling council'.⁴²

The changing financial climate for local government is seen both in the cash limits on local expenditure introduced during the 1980s and in the political centralisation imposed to enable the implementation of the new regime. Centralisation has also enabled attacks on sources of potential political opposition to Thatcherism, and has seen the recasting of the political bases of local government and administration, in the direction of a limited neo-corporatism. Elements of the neo-corporatist strategy may be seen particularly in the growth of non-elected local government,⁴³ although this is a corporatism which largely excludes labour. Finally, as I discussed above, privatisation and deregulation are key elements of the neo-liberal strategy in relation to the public services.

Ridley's concept of the 'enabling authority' foresees a shift in the pattern of service provision from one where the public sector finances, produces and controls the distribution of a wide range of services to one where 'unnecessary' services are eliminated and where the private sector plays a far larger role in the production and distribution of those services which remain. Among the principles that Ridley argues should inform the activities of local councillors is the idea

⁴¹Cochrane A (1989) 'Restructuring the state: the case of local government' in Cochrane A and Anderson J (eds) *Politics in transition* (London: Sage) pp95-140.

⁴²Ridley N (1988) *The local right: enabling not providing* (London: Centre for Policy Studies).

⁴³See Stoker G (1988) *The politics of local government* (London: Macmillan) especially pp52-79.

that the delegation of as much as possible to the private sector enables the local authority to direct resources better to where they are most needed and provide for them more effectively. It also helps to promote local firms and jobs and entrepreneurs.⁴⁴

To transform fully the pattern of local service provision the Conservatives would need to take on considerable central powers through which to try to force councils to tow the line. These powers were contained in a series of legislative measures which dramatically altered the legal framework of central-local relations in Britain.⁴⁵

The system of local government finance in Britain is Byzantine in its complexity. An initial impulse for change came in the mid-1970s as the Labour government sought to reduce overall public expenditure in response to economic crisis. At this time local authority expenditure peaked as a proportion of both gross domestic product and overall public expenditure,⁴⁶ and the proportion of local authority expenditure met from central government grant started to fall.⁴⁷ Thus considerable problems developed in the financing of local government services. Many local authorities tried to solve these problems by increasing rates to historically high levels. The election of the Conservative government in 1979 brought an intensification in the pressure on local government finances. Initially spending limits were introduced for some authorities. These were enforced by reducing central government grants for authorities which 'overspent'. However, councils could still increase rate poundages to maintain budgets. The government then introduced measures to limit rates rises: 'rate-capping'. The abolition of the domestic rating system in favour of a universal poll-tax and a uniform business rate followed soon after. This will increase the proportion of local authority expenditure met direct from central government grants. In turn this will increase central government's power over local government finances.

⁴⁴Ridley *op. cit.* p29.

⁴⁵Duncan S and Goodwin M (1988) *The local state and uneven development* (Cambridge: Polity).

⁴⁶Cochrane *op. cit.* p97.

⁴⁷*Ibid.* p111.

Non-elected local government comprises a large variety of (mostly specialist) agencies. Both Cochrane and Stoker argue that the scope of non-elected local government has grown in recent years. Stoker identifies six types of agencies:⁴⁸

- arm's length agencies of central government (eg district health authorities)
- local authority implementation agencies (eg enterprise boards)
- public private partnership organisations (eg local enterprise agencies)
- user organisations (eg housing management cooperatives)
- inter-governmental forums (eg voluntary regional planning committees)
- joint boards (eg fire authorities in metropolitan areas)

According to Stoker, the growth of non-elected local government has 'increased the complexity and fragmentation of the governmental environment at the local level. As a consequence the scope for organisational conflict and tension has increased'.⁴⁹ The wider significance of this development is more difficult to gauge. On the one hand, some agencies of non-elected local government may be viewed as increasing democratic control (tenants' management of housing for example). Other agencies seem symptomatic of a loss of local accountability (such as police, fire and transport joint boards in metropolitan areas).

The final major trend identified by both Cochrane and Stoker is that towards the privatisation of local service provision. The government have not sought to force councils to privatise the provision of their services. Rather they have forced them to compete with the private sector or other agencies for the right to provide services. The intention of this has been to introduce 'market discipline' to the public services sector, through compulsory competitive tendering thereby reducing costs and 'inefficiencies'. If this leads in some cases to contracting-out to the private sector that has the additional effect (beneficial in the Conservative view) of increasing the scope for private accumulation as the earlier quotation from Ridley

⁴⁸Stoker *op. cit.* p58.

⁴⁹*Ibid.* p79.

indicated.

Compulsory competitive tendering (CCT) was introduced in the Local Government Act, 1988. The preamble to the Bill which became the 1988 Act states that the legislation aims (among other things) 'to secure that local and other public bodies undertake certain activities only if they can do so competitively'. The provisions relating to compulsory competitive tendering (CCT) are to be found in Part 1 of the Bill, which 'requires local authorities ... who wish to afford their own staff the opportunity of carrying out certain activities to expose the activities to competitive tendering'. Thus CCT is already biased in favour of the private sector, since the time-consuming and costly tendering procedure is only required if the council wishes to try to retain services in-house. If the council decides simply to privatise a service, then it does not have to engage in a competition at all.

Campaigns against CCT have been a key area for trade union responses to local government restructuring and these will be considered at length in subsequent chapters. For this reason the provisions of the Act and its associated procedures are outlined in Appendix A.

None of these groups of policies were introduced fully formed. Their development was somewhat ad hoc and subject to experimentation, setbacks, and, most importantly, conflict. Among the most important sites for such experimentation and conflict were a number of local authorities controlled by Conservative groups allied to the 'new right'. One of these, Wandsworth, in south London, was the setting for a number of important industrial disputes, and provided the impetus for creative responses by the trade unions.

4 Wandsworth: Laboratory of Thatcherism

Introduction

In Chapter Three I argued that Thatcherism as a political phenomenon should be seen as more than a collection of particular policies. It increasingly represents an attempt by the state to resolve the crisis of the Fordist regime of accumulation through a change in the mode of regulation. However it is important to note three caveats.

Firstly, the coherence of the Thatcherite project should not be overstated. This caution may appear to undermine the argument that Thatcherism is a potential new mode of regulation, but it is accepted within regulation theory that a transition between modes of regulation will not be brought about by a voluntary decision on the part of one agency to implement a structured set of policies. However, it may be the case that government policies, the ideology through which they are represented and a given combination of economic changes may act together in a *relatively* coherent fashion, often in ways which their originators did not intend, and notwithstanding the contradictions between different parts of the whole. After all the Fordist regime of accumulation was contradictory, and it was in part that fact which led to its crisis. For as long as the contradictions of Thatcherism do not immediately act to threaten the emerging structures it may be considered to represent a potential resolution of the crisis.

Secondly, whatever the hopes of its eponymous progenitor, Thatcherism is limited in its effects to the national space of the United Kingdom. In that sense it is likely to be a national 'mode of growth', rather than a fully blown mode of regulation, although it would still be a form of a more general shift to a new mode

of regulation.

Thirdly, no new mode of regulation develops evenly. This uneven development over space will be the subject of later parts of this study. It is also subject to uneven development in respect of its different parts and structures and an unevenness through time. As Lipietz has put it:

[...] as nature is full of oddities like the ornithorhynchus or toucans, which have survived on very low stocks in between the dotted equilibria which scan the evolution of species, so in the same way is the history of capitalism full of short-lived experiments, or reabsorbed revolutions, of undeveloped prototypes and total freaks.¹

This chapter draws on the idea that the development of capitalism involves 'short-lived experiments' and 'undeveloped prototypes'. Lipietz's implication is that these prototypes fail to become widespread. However even (or perhaps especially) the most universal and longlasting inventions begin with prototypes. The analogy can thus be extended beyond the toucans of the social world to include those political and economic forms and ideological discourses which eventually emerge as dominant, or central to the new regime. The experiment and the prototype prefigure not only the oddities, the freaks and the dead ends, but also the normal, the successful and the through routes.

In its development then, Thatcherism as a national phenomenon drew on a variety of 'prototypes and experiments' for political and intellectual inspiration. The role of so-called right-wing think tanks such as the Adam Smith Institute, the Institute of Economic Affairs and the Centre for Policy Studies in developing new policies away from the public scrutiny accorded to the normal channels of policy making has often been remarked on. It has been one of the difficulties faced by the left in developing a radical response to Thatcherism that it does not have comparable institutions. Another source of 'experimentation' has been local government. Since party politics in Britain is practised at local as well as national level, local government can under certain circumstances provide a testing ground

¹Lipietz A (1984) 'Imperialism or the beast of the apocalypse' *Capital and Class* 22 p86.

for ideas which later find a role in the national arena.

Local government is also one of the major providers of public services, and consequently at the centre of the both New Right critique and the new mode of regulation discussed in Chapter Three. From the late 1970s onwards therefore, whenever the New Right in the Conservative Party was able to gain control over a local council, the stage was set for a Thatcherite experiment *avant la lettre*. Moreover, as was pointed out in Chapter One, local government services are very heavily unionised. While the trade union legislation was developed only piecemeal at the national level, trade unions were often the focus of both critique and political attack in particular local authorities. Just as these authorities provided a sort of laboratory of Thatcherism for the Government, they were also places of experimentation and development for the trade unions, both locally and as the broader significance of local developments became clear, more widely.

These processes were perhaps most advanced in the case of the London Borough of Wandsworth, purportedly the home of Mrs Thatcher's favourite Council, and the scene of a series of important disputes between the trade unions and the local authority. If Thatcherism or some development thereof succeeds in resolving the crisis in favour of capital and becomes a part of a new stabilisation and a new mode of regulation (neither of which is inevitable) then the experiment which took place in Wandsworth during the 1980s will have been crucial. Whether that happens will depend in part on the impact of the trade unionism which developed in response.

Wandsworth Borough Council 1978-1982: the flagship launched²

Preconditions and 'moderate' beginnings, 1971-79

From 1971 until May 1978 Wandsworth Council was controlled by the Labour Party (see table 4.1). At this time, both manual and white collar grades were heavily unionised. In the case of non-manual staff NALGO claim that the proportion of potential members who belonged to a union reached a peak of 80 per cent. The strongest areas of organisation were the social services and housing departments. The density figure has apparently since declined to about 66 per cent.³

Table 4.1: Wandsworth Borough Council election results

| Election Date | Total seats | Labour | Conservative | Others | Conservative majority |
|---------------|-------------|--------|--------------|--------|-----------------------|
| 1971 | 60 | 53 | 7 | 0 | -46 |
| 1974 | 60 | 48 | 12 | 0 | -36 |
| 1978 | 61 | 25 | 36 | 0 | 11 |
| 1982 | 61 | 27 | 33 | 1 | 5 |
| 1986 | 61 | 30 | 31 | 0 | 1 |
| 1990 | 61 | 13 | 48 | 0 | 35 |

Source: *Wandsworth Borough News* various dates

²In studying trade unionism in Wandsworth I have used a case study method to enable me to construct an account of the development of the trade union response to the restructuring of local government in the borough and to identify the set of conditions which generated that response (rather than some other). The account takes the form of the following narrative in which I aim both to describe the events which occurred and to identify some of the conditions, processes and mechanisms which generated them. (A discussion of the basis of this methodology may be found in Chapter Six, where I consider the relationship between case analysis and the realist approach to social science.)

³It has proved extremely difficult to obtain accurate union membership figures for local areas. In many cases there are simply no records in the appropriate form. Where such records do exist, union officers are normally unwilling to make them public. This seems to be due in part to the intense competition between unions for members in some places.

A former NUPE activist told me that when the Conservatives came to power in 1978 NUPE had about 500 members, and the then GMWU⁴ around 2,000. This implies a union density figure for manual staff of approximately 75 per cent. According to the same interviewee, NUPE's membership was concentrated among the refuse collectors and the park-keepers. The gardeners and the vast majority of other workplaces in the Council were covered by the GMWU.

In many respects local authority trade unionism in Wandsworth during the 1970s was typical of the defensive militancy I described in Chapter Two above. Faced with historically high levels of inflation and unemployment, and, from 1975, attempts by the Labour government to restrict public expenditure, local government trade unions throughout the country were pressing for their living standards to be maintained. Although this was a period when terms and conditions for local authority employees were determined to a considerable extent through negotiation at the National or Provincial Joint Councils, there were some features of the situation in Wandsworth Council which not only differentiated it from other boroughs in terms of its industrial relations, but also provided part of the context within which subsequent events unfolded.

In many areas local authority trade unionism during the 1970s was marked by competition between unions for members and influence. In Wandsworth the establishment of a Joint Shop Stewards' Committee (JSSC) involving NUPE, the GMWU and the TGWU seems to have minimised this sort of infighting. According to a former NUPE activist:

[there was] traditional rivalry throughout the sixties and the early part of the seventies. The JSSC helped iron out those difficulties and establish spheres of influence. People felt that there was a bigger problem than fighting against each other. Wandsworth was one of those see-saw boroughs. Labour had four years in power then the Tories had four years in power. The Conservatives were always perceived as being the problem, or a bigger problem than the Labour Party. I think that that led to a feeling that sectional union interests should be put aside, and people should get together and overcome a more traditional feeling of sectarianism. So the G and M convenor and a couple of good shop stewards established the

⁴General and Municipal Workers' Union.

JSSC.⁵

Initially the organisation was an informal, even clandestine, organisation, but it eventually developed into an official negotiating body:

At first it didn't have any status, people were meeting in their homes, and it was a caucus of stewards thrashing out differences between unions, things that could unite them, making them march together. By the late 1970s it had ceased to be a body which met almost clandestinely in people's houses and it established itself as the negotiating forum with councillors and started to meet in the Town Hall. People were given release to attend the JSSC and then the representatives of the JSSC became the representatives of the Joint Works Committee, so the whole thing had official status. You had a joint union negotiating structure, rather than a negotiating structure which involves all the unions, which is something quite different.⁶

This comparatively high level of unity and strong grassroots organisation was to prove important in subsequent developments in the borough. However, militant trade unionism was not confined to the Council's manual employees. The late 1970s also saw the establishment of Wandsworth NALGO as a key organisation. A former NALGO activist put it like this:

NALGO was a very well organised and extremely wealthy branch. The branch had had the foresight in the 1970s [in fact this was in 1979, after the Conservatives had gained power — JP] to set up a strike fund and all members contributed a 16 per cent levy on top of their subs. That gave us enormous financial resources which were a useful weapon. We had a branch administrator, we had a branch office, we had a lot of equipment, the capacity to produce high quality publicity very quickly and a good tradition of having a proper steward system.⁷

The significance of this last characteristic is clear from the fact that it was only in the late 1980s that NALGO began introducing a steward-based system of representation across the country.

High levels of membership, strong organisation and a lack of inter-union rivalry contributed to the unions' ability to make gains from the Labour Council. A further factor was the character of the Labour group itself. Wandsworth Council under Labour was committed to a radical programme of service expansion financed through rate increases. When it was rumoured in early 1978 that the Council

⁵Interview with the author, 16 January 1990.

⁶Interview with the author, 16 January 1990.

⁷Interview with the author, 26 January 1990.

planned to increase rates by 20 per cent, Councillor Morgan, then the Chair of the Council's Finance Sub-committee, told the local newspaper 'we are aiming to continue our programme of growth which we committed ourselves to three years ago'.⁸ Furthermore, this expansion was explicitly linked by some councillors to a wider project of socialist transformation. According to Councillor Ward,

Wandsworth's recent decision to make it a condition of the leases for Council factory buildings that the employers should pay trade union rates, recognise trade union rights, observe health and safety legislation and generally provide good working conditions is a step in the right direction. It is important not only because of the undoubted benefits it will bring for local workers, but also because it marks a new stage of cooperation between the local labour movement and the Labour group on the Borough Council. Labour groups on local councils are part of the labour movement, and we should not lose sight of our wider political aim of bringing the means of production, distribution and exchange into common ownership.⁹

In the event Labour's expansion plans *did* involve a rates rise of 20 per cent, leading the local newspaper to headline its lead story 'Huge rates shock - Labour Council does it again'.¹⁰ The Labour Party manifesto for the May 1978 local elections promised 'no cuts in Council services, no increases in charges and no redundancies among Council workers'.¹¹ However it seems that there was already widespread dissatisfaction among the electorate about the existing level of services. In particular Council tenants were unhappy with the standard of housing maintenance, described to me by one left Labour councillor as 'dire'.¹²

In the 1970s the trade unions were not the only group active in local politics in Wandsworth. The Conservative Party too had been preparing for the future. In 1976 (only a year after Margaret Thatcher became Conservative leader) a New Right pressure group called 'Aims for Freedom and Enterprise' published a pamphlet entitled *Waste in Wandsworth: how direct labour squanders ratepayers' money and the nation's resources*.¹³ It was written by the New Right economist

⁸Wandsworth Borough News 10 February 1978.

⁹Wandsworth Borough News 3 March 1978.

¹⁰Wandsworth Borough News 10 March 1978.

¹¹Wandsworth Borough News 7 April 1978.

¹²Interview with the author, 9 November 1989.

¹³Sherman A and Mallam D (1976) *Waste in Wandsworth: how direct labour squanders ratepayers'*

Alfred Sherman in collaboration with Conservative group leader Dennis Mallam. This document, which focuses on the building works department in Wandsworth Council, falls short of recommending privatisation, but elaborates many of the criticisms which were to become a hallmark of the Conservative approach to local government. These include the supposed high degree of wastage of resources by direct labour organisations, the lack of financial competitiveness compared with the private sector, and the malign role of the trade unions who are portrayed as gaining privileges for one group of workers at the expense of others.

Drawing on this sort of analysis, the Conservative campaign for the local elections juxtaposed the perceived poor quality of service and the above average rates increase and focussed heavily on the supposed waste and inefficiency of the Labour administration. One Labour councillor I spoke to said that this had 'struck a chord with the electorate', a view which has gained the status of received wisdom across the political spectrum, and in the trade unions. A Labour Party campaigner at the count on election night commented, 'how can you expect to win an election after imposing a 20 per cent rent increase?'.¹⁴

It is extremely difficult to assess the causes of particular election results. However, regardless of its effect on the decisions of voters, this ideology was significant because of the way it informed not merely the actions of the incoming Conservative administration, but also in time, and in rather different ways, the response of the trade unions to those policies.

These then were the preconditions for the Conservative victory at the polls in May 1978. However the borough remained politically marginal until May 1990. The intervening twelve years saw a series of conflicts involving the trade unions, the political parties and the users of Council services. The outcome of those conflicts have had far-reaching implications for Wandsworth, for public services,

money and the nation's resources (London: Aims for Freedom and Enterprise).

¹⁴Wandsworth Borough News 12 May 1978.

for the Conservative government, and not least for the trade unions at both national and local levels.

The Conservatives came to power under the leadership of the 'moderate' Dennis Mallam. The programme on which they were elected (under the heading 'Put Wandsworth right') included promises to reduce 'waste' and encourage home ownership. No mention at this stage was made of reducing the influence of trade unions, or of contracting out Council services. During the remainder of 1978 and the early part of 1979 Wandsworth Borough, like many other local authorities was involved in a series of industrial disputes with its manual workforce culminating in the national public service strikes of the so-called 'Winter of Discontent'. After the Conservatives had been in control in Wandsworth for a year, Mallam was replaced as leader by his deputy, the much more abrasive and radical Christopher Chope who shared the New Right perspectives of the Thatcher government which came to power at the same time. This 'coup' set the scene for a Thatcherite experiment in local government.

The New Right 'coup' and early skirmishes

I have already suggested that the restructuring of local government brought about by the New Right in Wandsworth may be seen as a sort of experiment for the Thatcher government's wider restructuring of the public services. It is in this sense that Wandsworth Council is often referred to as Thatcher's 'flagship Council'. In much the same way, however, the Chope administration was itself involved in experiments within the borough. The development of Conservative policy on the Council was marked by some *ad hoc* solutions and a degree of ruthless pragmatism, as well as by the popular image of doctrinaire Thatcherism. Thus to some extent it is only with hindsight that the relative coherence of the restructuring becomes apparent. That said, the local trade unions were the first to emphasise the wider significance of the Wandsworth experiment and were doing so from an early stage.

With hindsight, then, the key components of the Wandsworth 'model' include (i) reduction of costs through job-shedding, labour intensification, organisational change, and sub-contracting; (ii) sales of capital stock (particularly council housing); (iii) withdrawal of the local authority from functions deemed unnecessary, inappropriate or politically unacceptable (for example, 'the activities of homosexuals, massive units of researchers, strategic planners, police monitoring units';¹⁵ and (iv) prioritising the requirements of capital in the local area (for example, the use of receipts from sales to develop the local infrastructure which has 'proved attractive to private sector investment in the borough'.¹⁶

As this project developed over time, so did the response of the trade unions. In the early stages the unions were most concerned with those areas which had a direct impact on their members, such as the reorganisation of Council work and the moves to contract out the production of an increasing number of services to the private sector. Early campaigns focussed around the defence of jobs and working conditions during a period of very high unemployment. As time went on and the scale of the proposed changes became apparent, the unions developed a more sophisticated and radical approach. This represented the beginnings of a change from some of the previous forms of trade union struggle. In particular the traditional 'defensive militancy' of the 1970s started to give way to a trade unionism which sought to use the specific characteristics of the public services to set the agenda according to the priorities of workers and users, rather than managers. This changing pattern of trade union response can be seen in the development of struggles from the initial defeats in the street cleaning service to the

¹⁵Beresford P (1987) *Good council guide: Wandsworth 1978-87* (London: Centre for Policy Studies) p5.

¹⁶*Ibid.* p6. This use of public sector capital for infrastructural investment is hardly typically Thatcherite, although Wandsworth Council's self-proclaimed status as the 'Brighter Borough' seemed just as much a part of its appeal to the former Prime Minister as its more right-wing policies. Indeed Labour councillors readily accept that this aspect of the programme has been successful. Its appeal to Mrs Thatcher may perhaps be explained by its having been financed in part through sales of council housing, often on the open market.

cooperation of NALGO and local tenants groups to prevent the privatisation of housing caretaking.

It took some time for the new Council leadership to introduce major cuts in Council expenditure. However, between 1979 and 1987 the Council cut its revenue expenditure by sixteen per cent in real terms.¹⁷ From the start this had considerable consequences for the workforce:

By Autumn 1980, with Wandsworth enthusiastically embracing the policy of cutbacks, there had been a reduction of over 1,000 jobs through the use of 'natural wastage' and frozen posts. This had been contributed to by the closure of some old people's homes, luncheon club facilities and other Council establishments considered surplus to requirements.¹⁸

It was at this point that the Council first raised the threat of privatisation in an attempt to force through a restructuring of the refuse collection service. The tactic worked and the agreement implemented in January 1981 resulted in a reduction of nine vehicles and 39 jobs, saving the Council over £400,000.¹⁹

Chope immediately announced further cuts of £21m. These involved proposals to reduce the manual workforce by 300 and the white-collar staff by 400. The manual and white-collar unions organised a joint day of action followed by selective strike action by key white-collar workers. NALGO's foresight in building a large strike fund enabled it to pay its striking members their full salary, thus enabling them to see the action through. Cooperation between NALGO and the manual unions during this dispute was a key development which prepared the ground for what was to come. The unions managed to secure an agreement from the Council that there would be no compulsory redundancies and that reductions in the workforce would be achieved through a voluntary severance scheme. Initially this agreement applied to the whole workforce.

¹⁷*Ibid.* p7. This figure excludes expenditure relating to the additional functions taken over by London Boroughs following the abolition of the GLC in 1986.

¹⁸Benlow D and Scott I (1983) *Fighting privatisation: the struggle for Wandsworth* (Nottingham: Institute for Workers' Control and NUPE) p4.

¹⁹*Ibid.* pp4-5.

At this time the Council's street sweepers were involved in negotiations about work organisation and working conditions. Dissatisfied with the progress of the talks, the Council proposed that while negotiations continued, tenders to carrying out street sweeping in Wandsworth should be invited from the private sector. This approach was supported by the Leisure and Amenity Services Committee at its meeting on 1 July 1981. By December, negotiations with the direct service organisation (DSO) had led to an agreement to reduce the workforce to 100 and increase labour 'flexibility', but the tender invitation had resulted in thirteen private companies expressing interest in the contract. Of these, five were under active consideration by the Council. All five offered to operate the service with fewer workers than the DSO. Proposed staffing levels ranged from a 'high' of 86 (Ramoneur) to a low of 63 (Pritchards).²⁰

On 18 January 1982, having previously narrowed the field to a choice between Pritchards and the DSO, the Policy and Finance Committee awarded the five-year street cleaning contract to Pritchards Industrial Services Limited to start on 1 March. Pritchards' tender price was £787,775 compared with an estimated direct labour cost of £1.2 million.²¹ This decision was a defeat for the unions. The unions' objection to privatisation was based on the likely impact on the jobs, wages and conditions of their members, both immediately and in the longer term, on a possible deterioration in service standards and on the principle that public services should not form a source of private profit. Failure to retain the street cleaning service in the public sector led to a re-evaluation of the unions' strategy, the need for which rapidly became apparent as the Council turned its attention to the refuse collection service.

Pritchards' contract with the Council contained provisions to impose penalties

²⁰London Borough of Wandsworth Department of Technical Services quoted in Benlow and Scott *op. cit.* pp8-9.

²¹Ward M (undated) *Municipal monetarism: a study of nine years of Tory rule in Wandsworth* (London: Greater London Labour Party) p13.

up to and including terminating the contract if the specification was not met. This penalty system came into effect after an initial phasing-in period and the contractor immediately exceeded the level of penalties which gave the Council the right to terminate the contract. The start of the industrial dispute in the refuse collection service provided the Council with an excuse to waive the penalties for a period. However, even after the refuse dispute had been settled, the standard of street cleaning in Wandsworth continued to fall far short of that specified in the contract, to the extent that 'on three separate occasions in 1982 and 1983, Pritchards' performance was so bad that the Council had the right to sack them'.²²

Having lost their own workforce, and not wishing to lose face, the Council declined to fire the contractor on every occasion when it had the opportunity to do so. Instead it sporadically suspended the penalty system and instituted a system of penalty-free zones. These measures enabled the Council to retain the contractor regardless of the standard of service provided. When Pritchards' contract expired in 1986 the specification was redrawn and the tender awarded to Teamwaste at a cost 50 per cent higher than had been provided for in the Councils' budget. Calculations by Michael Ward suggest that overall it would actually have been cheaper to retain the old direct labour force in the first place.²³

The 'dust' and the 1982 election

However, it seems that Chope was determined to push through a widespread package of privatisation. Just when Pritchards were running into their first problems fulfilling the street cleaning contract they offered to take over the Council's refuse collection service as well. Taking this offer as its cue, on 23 March 1982, only six weeks before the local elections, the Council decided to invite tenders for refuse collection and at the same time to ask the trade unions to submit

²²*Ibid.* p17.

²³*ibid.* p19.

proposals for 'improving the cost effectiveness' of the service.²⁴

The unions' experience with street cleaning privatisation suggested to them that involvement in negotiations over the costs and organisation of the direct labour service was not in their interests while tenders were being invited from private contractors at the same time. The unions took the view that the Council's ideological commitment to privatisation and the ability of the multinational companies involved to offer unrealistically low 'loss-leader' bids in order to gain a foothold involvement in the tendering process could only lead to a 'victory' for direct labour on the basis of under-cutting the private sector on staffing levels and pay and conditions. This, it was felt, was not in the interests of the members involved. This position is now widely accepted in the union movement and exemplifies the way local developments eventually fed into wider processes of trade union response.

Instead of becoming involved in the tendering process the unions launched a campaign of opposition to the whole exercise. The organisation of this campaign represented a development from forms of trade union action typical of the 1970s. It was seen as important to try to form a campaign which was based not merely on the manual trade union membership, but also on the ratepayers, NALGO, the local Labour Party branches, the Trades Council and tenants' groups.²⁵ The liaison committee between white-collar and manual trade unions was able to build on the spirit of cooperation developed during the street cleaners dispute. It decided that the campaign should aim for an end to the tendering process and a 'no privatisation agreement' covering all the Council's employees.

The Joint Union Liaison Committee decided to begin the campaign on 19 April 1982, the day the Council was to invite tenders. The committee called a mass meeting of the workforce on 7 April and recommended that the campaign should

²⁴Wandsworth Borough Council (1982) *Report by the Director of Technical Services to the Policy and Finance Committee* (mimeo) p1.

²⁵Benlow and Scott *op. cit.* p10.

involve industrial action. Two thousand workers from all sections attended the meeting and supported the recommendation. The national officers of the unions concerned also addressed the gathering.

The strike committee recommended that there should be a one-day strike of all Council workers. This would then be followed by a one week strike of all the manual workers with the refuse section remaining on strike thereafter and picketing waste disposal sites to try to prevent the Council using contractors to clear the rubbish. This action was relatively successful and some of the contractors withdrew early in the dispute. Following their earlier pattern of selective industrial action, NALGO brought key sections such as cashiers and telephonists out on strike, effectively stopping the Council's administration from functioning. The union's ability to pay generous strike pay to its members was important in maintaining support for the action.

The industrial action generated a lot of publicity. The unions produced their own propaganda and targeted the broadcast media. The local newspaper, the *Wandsworth Borough News*, featured the dispute on page one for nine weeks in succession. The unions 'felt more than pleased at the way the arguments came across'.²⁶ Despite the relatively favourable publicity, however, the unions in Wandsworth found it extremely difficult to generalise the struggle to the workforces of other London Boroughs, the national union organisations²⁷ or the local Labour group.

With the local elections approaching, the unions approached the Labour Party in an attempt to solicit guarantees that the tendering process would be stopped if the

²⁶Benlow D, Ramage P, French M, Simmonds D and Whitfield D (1983) *Public jobs for private profit: fighting contractors in Wandsworth* (London: Wandsworth Trade Union Publications) p52.

²⁷The then NUPE branch secretary, Dave Benlow brought an emergency resolution to NUPE's 1982 national conference which took place while the dispute in Wandsworth was still going on. Speaking in the debate he pleaded with the national union for support for the dispute. The Executive Council supported the resolution and it was carried by the conference, though only after the Assistant General Secretary had warned of 'serious difficulties of logistics and practical problems'. See NUPE (1982) 'Report of national conference' in *NUPE Report* (London: NUPE) p184.

Labour Party was returned to power. While the General Management Committees of the constituencies in the borough supported the unions, senior figures in the Labour group on the Council initially declined to give the unequivocal guarantees the workers were seeking. Eventually all the Labour councillors did sign a statement of support, but it was given little publicity.²⁸

When I asked one local trade unionist if the Council elections had been seen as something of a referendum on the issue of privatisation, he said:

No it wasn't posed like that. This was the trouble. We were arguing that the Labour group should give it a high profile so that we could discuss the issue of what kind of council services people want. We thought this was an opportunity at least to do that, since that was one of the reasons we were out on strike. But the starting point was that council workers had a bad image, and I think there was a feeling they would be on a hiding to nothing if they made too high a profile.²⁹

The ideological construction of Council workers which had developed during the period of Labour control in the 1970s on top of the general memory of the 'Winter of Discontent' was clearly influential both in determining the response of Labour councillors (some of whom had no firm roots in the Labour movement) and in a rather different way in the process of self-criticism and transformation in union strategies in the aftermath of the refuse dispute. A former officer of the NALGO branch in Wandsworth told me that this perception of the manual workers was also held by the white collar employees of the Council:

Getting [white collar] support around privatisation was not as easy as it might have been. The 'dust' was not a popular section. The perception of them conformed to the usual stereotype of people who started at five o'clock in the morning, clocked off at ten and then did their taxi job, 'totting',³⁰ Christmas boxes [...] they weren't the most popular group of workers. But I think there was a general perception that you just couldn't let them go. It was quite clear to everybody that this was a key dispute that would be decisive one way or the other.³¹

However, Wandsworth NALGO was under no illusions about the impact of this perception on the Labour group:

The key thing was the election and there was a problem for us in that people were looking

²⁸Benlow *et al. op. cit.* p56.

²⁹Interview with the author, 16 January 1990.

³⁰Totting is the practice of retrieving items of value from the refuse for resale.

to the election to sort it out. They were looking for Labour to come back and resolve it. As a union our strategy certainly hadn't been to wait for Labour, because we didn't trust them one inch. NALGO had informal discussion with a senior figure in the Labour group who was desperately anxious for us to call off the action because it was perceived as damaging Labour's election prospects. This senior figure wouldn't give us any commitment not to privatise the dust. I think they were influenced by a perception that the dust were a bunch of racist so and sos and didn't have black workers and therefore their liberal revulsion at their perception of the dust probably got the better of them.³²

In the event the dispute did not seem to do the Labour Party any electoral harm. Against the national trend the Conservative majority was reduced from eleven to five on 6 May, but this did nothing to weaken the Council's resolve to see the dispute through. Once Labour had lost the election the NALGO leadership split between those who wished to continue with industrial action to support the refuse collectors, and those who argued for a return to work and negotiations. By this stage the strike fund which had been built up over years was running low, and despite the Conservatives' reduced majority, the defeat at the election led some to question the legitimacy of continuing the action.³³

At a meeting of the membership on 12 May the decision was taken by two to one to call off the NALGO action. With the refuse section now out on its own it was only a matter of time before the dispute came to a bitter end. The management offered to let the unions see the private tenders before putting in their own proposals. On the basis of this and with no sign of national support the strike was called off.

The lowest tender for the work came from Grandmet and this was accepted by the Council. The company took over the provision of the refuse service in Wandsworth in October 1982.

³¹Interview with the author, 26 January 1990.

³²Interview with the author, 26 January 1990.

³³Benlow *et al. op. cit.* p58.

Learning the lessons

The Council

The failure of the trade unions to prevent the privatisation of the refuse collection service in Wandsworth through either direct action or the electoral defeat of the Conservatives heralded the start of a programme of increasing privatisation in the Borough. The current leader of the Council, Sir Paul Beresford, identifies fifteen different services which have been privatised and claims that this has 'saved' the Council £19m, or an average of 30 per cent of the relevant budgets. Furthermore the use of competitive tendering procedures in a further eight services resulted in the work being retained in-house and further 'savings' of £5.9m.³⁴

The Council learnt from its early experiences of privatisation. After the initial poor performance of Pritchards the administration has become much more stringent in the vetting and monitoring of contractors. A former Labour councillor told me that the contract specifications developed by Wandsworth have been adopted as models by, among others, the Labour-controlled Association of London Authorities.³⁵ The Council's political opponents (including some in the union movement) agree that the standard of some of the privatised services is satisfactory. What causes concern is the conditions for the workforces involved and the low level of provision of some other Council functions such as social services: 'on basic services - lighting, pavements, sweeping and bin-emptying - Fiona MacTaggart [the former leader of the Labour group] concedes it would be wrong to suggest that Wandsworth is not competent but "that is only two per cent of our budget"'.³⁶

The unions

The unions were just as keen to learn the lessons of the street cleaning and refuse

³⁴Beresford *op. cit.* p10.

³⁵Interview with the author, 9 November 1989.

³⁶Quoted in Linton M (1990) 'If I can get it for £148 why pay more?' *The Guardian* 16 May p21.

collection privatisation episodes. This was seen as important for future struggles in Wandsworth, and because of the conviction that the Conservative Party would try to generalise the model of local government which was developing in Wandsworth. Given the threat that this would pose to the union movement in the public services sector it was seen to be important that the unions should themselves seek to spread the lessons to other areas and to the national level.

For the trade unions, learning the lessons of the events of the early 1980s involved a twin process of self-criticism and transformation. By the time of the dispute over the privatisation of the refuse collection, the unions were already drawing lessons from their earlier defeat in street cleaning. The most notable developments were the refusal to participate in the tendering process, the decision to use industrial action, including solidarity action, the attempt to get a commitment from the Labour Party to halt the privatisation process if returned to office, and the emphasis given to publicity.

The decision not to participate in the tendering process stemmed from the preceding experience with the street cleaning dispute. It was increasingly seen that the Council was engaged in a political project to reduce the role of the public sector in the provision of services, and that nothing was to be gained from participating in the exercise. The decision to use industrial action stemmed from a belief that such means could potentially force the Council to reverse its policy. This conviction was based again on the strength and relative unity of the local authority unions in the area. The decision by the NALGO branch to establish a strike fund was of key significance in enabling NALGO members to participate fully in solidarity action, as was NALGO's unusually strong steward organisation, particularly in the housing department and its high level of activism. The dependence of many in the local community on the social services department led to those workers being exempted by the unions from action. This recognised the importance of gaining public support, something which was also reflected in the high profile publicity

campaign. The unions were largely happy with the publicity the campaign received, but as yet there was little attempt to break down user alienation from public services. The publicity still focussed on the high levels of unemployment in the area, and while the campaign's own newspaper, *Wandsworth Call*, stressed the threat to services the emphasis was on the level of service provision, rather than the nature or quality of the services provided. The justifiable emphasis on high unemployment might also be seen as something of a double-edged sword. While it may encourage a defence of jobs, it can also frighten workers from taking action in breach of contract in case this leads to dismissal. This is particularly a factor for those workers engaged in solidarity action.

It was seen as important not merely to learn the lessons of the dispute but also to disseminate them to other areas and to the wider labour movement. Soon after the end of the strike and only one week after the Council had awarded the refuse contract to Grand Met, Dave Benlow (NUPE branch secretary during the campaign) and Ian Scott (the NUPE full-time officer with responsibility for Wandsworth) participated in a seminar on the issue of privatisation at Ruskin College in Oxford. There they presented a paper on the Wandsworth experience which outlined the lessons learnt from the dispute. The papers from the seminar were subsequently published as an edited collection that they might be read more widely.³⁷ In addition NUPE published Benlow and Scott's paper as a separate pamphlet.³⁸ Another, slightly more detailed pamphlet was produced in Wandsworth by the local union activists.³⁹

These publications identify the major lessons for the trade unions from the defeats in Wandsworth:

It must be remembered that Wandsworth Council was then at the vanguard of the developing attack on the public sector. It was Margaret Thatcher's favourite borough, led by aggressive Tory hatchet men who boasted publicly at political conferences and seminars of their past and proposed achievements in privatising public services. It was politically

³⁷Hastings S and Levie H (1983) *Privatisation?* (Nottingham: Spokesman).

³⁸Benlow and Scott *op. cit.*

very important to the Conservative Party and its backers to sustain the momentum of privatisation at that early stage. [...] Crucially we were the first Trade Union organisation in local government to stand and fight in a major strike action [...] Wandsworth unions had to be broken to discourage active resistance elsewhere.⁴⁰

The activists then go on to outline the preconditions for a successful campaign. It is interesting to note that the space-time context of the action, which I will discuss in some detail in Chapter Six, is central (albeit in different language) to the trade unionists' self-appraisal:

We thus confronted a strong, well-financed, nationally supported and dogmatic adversary with traditional localised Trade Union weapons, and these weapons proved to be not enough. It is now clear to us that against this particular enemy with our particular demand at that particular time, we would have needed all the weapons summarised below in order to win through:

What we had

- a joint organisation of all Council unions which was able to overcome some traditional sectional rivalries
- a local tradition of militancy, and a broad understanding of the issues at stake amongst most union members in the borough

What we lacked

- the support of a more general national campaign with national resources invested in our local struggle (ie more than just strike pay)
- supportive industrial action of other local government workers in neighbouring boroughs, and of workers in the local Branches of the national utility unions
- the active support of the local tenants and consumers of public services.⁴¹

To meet the need for a national campaign which could successfully coordinate action at local and national levels as appropriate they proposed the establishment of a permanent 'Task Force' to intervene rapidly with practical support for a local campaign when necessary. This body would be set up under the auspices of the TUC Public Services Committee, and would provide assistance with administration, publicity, media presentation, and liaison with tenants and user groups. They argue that this would resolve 'in a practical way the difficulty of fighting *local* disputes which are the result of the Government's *national* strategy on privatisation'.⁴²

The suggestion of this policy as a result of drawing lessons from their

³⁹Benlow *et al.*, *op. cit.*

⁴⁰*Ibid.* p18.

⁴¹*Ibid.* pp18-19, emphasis original.

⁴²*Ibid.* p21, emphasis original.

campaign is related to the status of Wandsworth as a flagship borough, and this is one way that the local character of the authority had an impact on the unions' evaluation of their strategy. The second suggestion of more support from neighbouring boroughs derives straightforwardly from the lack of such support in the Wandsworth campaign, and the awareness of the broader implications for the restructuring of the public services in general. Finally, the identification of a lack of active support from the users of services as a key weakness is partly simply because such support would assist the unions in realising their aims. It is however interesting that such a suggestion should be stressed by unions in Wandsworth, and this has to do with the rapidly changing social make-up of the area. I will explore the links between the characteristics of local areas and trade union policy in detail in Chapter Six.

New initiatives

It was not long before the unions had the chance to try to practice what they were preaching. Many (though not all) of the practical initiatives to implement the new approach were undertaken by NALGO, something which reflects the fact that NALGO's organisation survived the initial attacks much better than did those of the manual unions. One example of a campaign will illustrate the path of events.

In July 1983 the Council invited Grand Metropolitan, which held the refuse contract, to conduct a study of the feasibility of privatising the management of a Roehampton housing estate. The union whose members would be affected by such a development was NALGO. According to a senior NALGO activist, the local branch quickly decided that a novel strategy should be employed to prevent the privatisation of housing management. The key element of this strategy was an alliance with users' groups (in this case tenants' associations) on the affected estate. This involved winning the confidence of tenants' associations in Roehampton, campaigning jointly with them in opposition to privatisation, and combining adventurous publicity with traditional industrial action taken in conjunction with the

tenants so that they were aware of why the workers were striking.

The focus of the campaign was the joint preparation of an alternative plan for the delivery of the housing management service. This was drawn up by the tenants and the shopfloor workers in the Roehampton estate office (regardless of which union, if any, they belonged to). The plan analysed why the service was unpopular and failed to command public support, and examined ways of improving the service so that the unions could be seen to be concerned about the quality of service delivery.

Starting from the premise that the plan would involve no cuts, they took the existing budget as given and designed a reorganisation of the service to counterpose against whatever Grand Met might produce. The willingness of the unions to enter into 'severe self-criticism' at joint meetings earned them the trust of the tenants who 'adopted the strategy enthusiastically'.

The fact that the unions were now on the attack on the issue of privatisation lifted morale. Some of the plan was put into action. The unions established evening housing surgeries staffed by the membership who took time off in lieu during the day. The aim of this was to see if the management would dare to challenge the new ideas by disciplining workers for taking the time off.

A one day strike was planned. At one meeting when some workers seemed a little reluctant to participate the tenants themselves insisted that they go on strike to show that they were in earnest. On the day of the strike a joint picket was established outside the housing office as a protest against the visit of the Grand Met representative to consult the office's files. One of the unionists involved described the action:

you had to go through a small courtyard to get to the office so it was quite easy to barricade. A whole group of tenants blocked-off the entrance and we were behind them. And the Grand Met bloke couldn't get in.⁴³

⁴³Interview with the author, 26 January 1990.

The campaign thus undermined the Conservative critique of public services and justification for privatisation by showing that the union position had gained the support of the very people who were supposed to be dissatisfied with the service. The campaign also targeted the contractor directly through a picket of Grand Met's headquarters and a consumer boycott of the company's products. Unused to such political pressure the company was embarrassed by the attention and eventually pulled out of the project.

While this gave an important morale boost to the unions in Wandsworth, the weakening that the organisations had received meant that this sort of approach could not in the end prevent the Conservative project for the Borough continuing. In recognition of the importance accorded by the Thatcher regime its 'flagship Council', the leader, Christopher Chope, was awarded an OBE. In January 1983 he stood down to be replaced by Paul (now Sir Paul) Beresford. Chope entered parliament in the 1983 General Election and rapidly rose to junior ministerial rank.

5 The development of national union policy

This chapter considers the development of trade union policy at the national level. I have shown how the Thatcher administration placed considerable importance on ensuring that the restructuring of local government services was not restricted to a few isolated enclaves like Wandsworth. The government sought to generalise from the radical experiments conducted in a small number of right wing authorities.

Many of the trade unionists involved in the disputes in Wandsworth believed that it was the failure of the labour movement to generalise in the same way from its experiences that was one of the major causes of their early defeats. This complaint was concerned with the lack of nationally-coordinated action in support of a local dispute. However such immediate action is not the only form in which the generalisation of experiences can occur, and even at this relatively early stage there is evidence that at least some of the unions recognised the threat posed by privatisation and competitive tendering. This chapter focuses largely on the changing responses of the unions to that threat. It will be clear from the arguments of the preceding chapter that this threat is only one component of a wider process of restructuring. It is therefore important to justify the more limited focus of this account.

Firstly, while it is only one component of the restructuring, it is a central one. It represents an attempt by the government to bring about a significant change in the relationship between the public and private sectors of the economy. Importantly, this change would be a change in the power relationship between the two. The public sector would become subordinate to both the requirements and organisational principles of private capital to a much greater extent than it has been in the past.

Therefore secondly, it would act as an important part of the shift to a new mode of regulation which was outlined in Chapter Three. It would not be the only possible route out of the crisis of Fordism, but is part of a possible one. Whether it could succeed before its own contradictions overcome it is another question.

Thirdly, most of the trade unionists I spoke to argued that while privatisation and competitive tendering were only part of a wider process of change they were a key part. Thus if I am to investigate how trade union responses develop over time and space it is important to focus on an area where the trade unions see it as important to generate a response.

Fourthly, given this situation, the response to privatisation and competitive tendering in local government has been one area where trade union action has been unusually vigorous and rapidly developing. It might be thought that this means that it is also unrepresentative of union responses to social change in general. Quite so. However it is not my intention to be representative in a statistical sense. (Although I hope that this study will illuminate other areas of trade union activity.) On the contrary, just as Wandsworth Borough Council and the Local Government Act 1988 might be described as part of a 'leading edge' of a process of restructuring or even of a new mode of regulation, so the trade union response to these developments forms, I believe, part of a leading edge of the changing nature of trade unionism in Britain in the 1980s.

These four reasons, are reinforced by a number of practical considerations which require the object of study to be relatively closely delimited. In what follows therefore I shall consider first the initial individual national union responses to the early stages of privatisation. These policies tended to reflect the forms of trade union practice inherited from the 1970s. I shall then discuss the development of an alternative approach by an institution outside the mainstream of the labour movement. After considering the unions' campaign to prevent the compulsory tendering legislation reaching the statute books I shall conclude by outlining their

policy towards that legislation once it was enacted.

Initial developments

In the early stages (up to 1983) the national union organisations were responding in a number of ways. Firstly, they provided some direct support to those engaged in local action. For example the mass meeting of council workers in Wandsworth was attended by national officers of all the unions involved and motions of support were passed at national union conferences such as that endorsed by the NUPE conference in 1982. Where this fell short of what some local organisations were demanding was in failing to engage in national action beyond the particular dispute in progress.

Secondly, they formulated policy and advice concerning the appropriate response by local union organisations in the event of a privatisation threat. In 1982 NUPE published two pamphlets titled *Keep your council services public: say no to private contractors* and *Defend direct labour*, while shortly afterwards the then GMWU published *Privatisation and public services*.¹ These documents outlined the unions' respective positions in relation to local initiatives to privatise local services. They exemplify certain characteristics of the unions' approach at this stage: (i) each union produced its own pamphlet(s): there was no significant joint union work at the national level; (ii) the future wider threat of privatisation was seen as stemming from the voluntary replication of the Wandsworth approach rather than legislation; (iii) union action against the threat of privatisation was seen as essentially a local affair; and (iv) the fight against private contractors was to be on the basis of a defence of existing standards and forms of service, rather than a critique of the nature of current provision. For example:

these [campaign] measures will help to combat the climate of opinion which the Government has tried to create of an image of the public service as bureaucratic and

¹NUPE (1982) *Keep your council services public: say no to private contractors* (London: NUPE); NUPE (1982) *Defend direct labour* (London: NUPE); GMWU (1982) *Privatisation and public services* (Esher: GMWU).

inefficient.²

Subsequently the unions were to argue that the representation of the public services as bureaucratic and inefficient stems as much from the direct experiences of the users of those services as from government propaganda.

Thirdly, the national labour movement institutions were engaged in a propaganda battle both against the government's encouragement of privatisation and against private contractors.

At this stage, although senior members of the government were emphasising the supposed benefits of contracting out,³ there was little evidence that the government wanted to *force* widespread competitive tendering in local government. However, the unions *were* facing threats from compulsory tendering in two areas. In local government itself, the Local Government Planning and Land Act, which was passed in 1980, aimed to compel councils to compete against the private sector to provide building services. In the National Health Service it was clear that the DHSS was determined to insist that local Health Authorities put their ancillary services out to tender. In both these cases the unions involved were often the same ones whose members worked in the local government services subsequently to be affected by CCT, namely the GMB, NUPE, NALGO and the TGWU.

Thus while national union action on local government privatisation was limited before 1983, the unions involved did see policies such as those pursued in Wandsworth as part of a larger shift in the production and provision of public services and in the relationship between the state and private sectors. For example, at NUPE's annual conference in 1982 a resolution was passed with the support of the leadership which said among other things that

Conference notes the campaign being organised by Government and the contracting industry to privatise public services and break up direct labour organisations in local authorities. We recognise that this is being achieved by way of a concerted political campaign backed up by legislation, which seeks to undermine local authority trade union and working

²GMWU *op.cit.* p22.

³Ascher K (1987) *The politics of privatisation* (London: Macmillan) p38.

conditions and the whole concept of services based upon need, not profit.⁴

The early responses of the national union organisations were fairly traditional ones. By and large they consisted of the publication of guidelines for action which was otherwise to be organised at the local level. Although the unions may have seen a common threat, at this stage their policy formulation was taking place in isolation from one another. Campaigns were on the basis of defending, rather than criticising, the status quo and while lip service was paid to the need to pursue campaigns at the local level jointly with users and the other unions, there was only the most rudimentary guidance as far as the practical implementation of this strategy was concerned.

However there were some signs of change. In early 1983 NALGO launched a campaign against privatisation in the public services under the slogan 'Put people first'. This lasted for three months and cost £1m. Such large scale general publicity campaigns had long been an aspect of national trade union activity on a range of issues. This one was sufficiently novel to attract grudging praise from the activists in Wandsworth. While insisting that their request for national union action had something very different in mind they stated 'it would be irresponsible to dismiss this campaign out of hand, since after all it is the most imaginative effort to date by any Trade Union in this field'.⁵

After the re-election of the Thatcher government in May 1983 the character of the unions' policies towards privatisation and competitive tendering in local government began to change more rapidly. Before considering how and why this occurred, however, it is important to consider the (in my view) crucial role played by an organisation outside the formal institutions of the trade union movement.

⁴NUPE (1982) 'Report of national conference' in *NUPE Report* (London: NUPE) pp176-7.

⁵Benlow D, Ramage P, French M, Simmonds D and Whitfield D (1983) *Public jobs for private profit: fighting contractors in Wandsworth* (London: Wandsworth Trade Union Publications) p19.

The SCAT initiative

Services to Community Action and Trade Unions (SCAT) is a 'national housing, planning and public service project serving the labour movement'. Established in 1973, SCAT's initial activities were concerned with housing issues. Originally it was funded by Shelter, the housing charity, but its increasing politicisation led to the establishment of SCAT Publications as a separate organisation. The group became increasingly experienced in campaigning with tenants groups and sees the development of campaign strategies as one of its main strengths.

After 1979 SCAT became more concerned with issues around the privatisation of public services. Being outside the mainstream of the trade union organisations enabled it to adopt a critical perspective on the existing state of public service provision, and on the forms of trade unionism which had built up within it which were discussed in Chapter Two. In 1983 SCAT began publishing 'Public Service Action': a newsletter which sought to inform the labour movement on the processes of privatisation and restructuring in the public services and publicise campaign initiatives.

In 1980 a senior member of NUPE's London Division and an activist in SCAT started to work together on what was initially intended as an education pack for trade unionists on the subject of privatisation. However, by the time it was published in 1982 it had developed beyond its early aims and can now be seen as a key document in the development of labour movement policy on public service privatisation. The pack contained what was to become known as the 'seven-point plan'. What distinguished this strategy from previous policies on privatisation was the implicit critique of both existing standards of public services and past union practices. This approach therefore acknowledges the extent to which the New Right critique of the public sector is in tune with the experiences of many users of public sector services.

The strategy represents a critique of many of the (implicit) assumptions

underpinning the sort of defensive trade union action which failed to prevent the privatisation of street cleaning and refuse collection in Wandsworth and elsewhere. Drawing on the experience of fighting cuts in public services in the late 1970s, SCAT put a series of five new assumptions in their place. Firstly it was thought that 'defensive demands alone are inadequate' since they imply fighting to restore something which was already inadequate. Second it was recognised that the alienation of service users from public services meant that automatic public support was unlikely to be forthcoming. This means that thirdly, a successful defence of the principle of public provision requires a joint struggle by workers and users. Fourthly, given the alienation referred to, this must involve trade unionists in developing new visions of what public services involve and alternative forms of provision. Finally, reliance on traditional forms of industrial action will be inadequate.

Figure 5.1: The seven point plan

The 'Seven Point Plan'

- 1 *Developing alternative ideas and demands to improve services* - this includes sections on demanding 'no privatisation' agreements with Labour-controlled councils, and developing workers' and users' plans.
- 2 *Education and propaganda* - including preparation of material for the workplace, to users of services and to the wider public, explaining the full effects of privatisation and describing the value and advantages of public services.
- 3 *Building stronger workplace organisations and links with workers in other boroughs* - through regular depot/section/department mass meetings, setting up local authority joint shop stewards committees and links with JSSCs in other areas.
- 4 *Developing joint action and organising user committees with PTAs, tenants groups* - why joint action is important and how to develop links with users including some recent examples.
- 5 *Tactical use of industrial action and negotiating machinery* - including the use of selective strike action, refusing to co-operate with management on various issues, refusal to collect charges and other forms of selective industrial action to strengthen a negotiating position. This must be done in conjunction with other action in order to minimise the alienation of the users of services.
- 6 *Direct action by workers and users* - including picketing, organising boycotts, occupations and campaigns to improve services - all to strengthen industrial action and build political support.
- 7 *Counter offensive against contractors in public services* - covering fighting the preparation of tenders, imposing conditions on contractors through the implementation of strong Standing Orders, and campaigning to remove existing contractors.

These assumptions inform the practical strategy itself, which was outlined in one of the papers presented to the trade unions' privatisation workshop at Ruskin College in 1982 (see Figure 5.1).

It will be immediately apparent that a number of these elements were present in the campaign in Roehampton to prevent the privatisation of housing management which was discussed in the preceding chapter. SCAT was involved in the publication of one of the accounts of the disputes in Wandsworth, and in the aftermath of their defeat the union activists there were keen to apply an alternative approach.

In Chapter Two I suggested that the forms of trade union action which developed with the growth of the public sector services in the 1960s and early 1970s and with its subsequent retrenchment after 1976 could be characterised as 'defensive militancy'. These forms became routinised in the practices of public service unionism so that they continued to be used to fight battles for which they were no longer necessarily appropriate. The assumptions outlined above, and the strategy based on them, may be seen as an attempt to break the simple reproduction of public service trade unionism over time and to transform it so that it is better suited to the new terrain.

The campaign against legislation

It would be wrong to imply that the seven-point plan has been adopted directly as a joint union policy on all aspects of local government restructuring. It has not. However it is an important component of, and in many ways was the trigger for, a shift in overall union policy which was simultaneously a shift in the ways trade unions and trade unionists in the public sector represent themselves to themselves and to others.

This shift involves a change in the way that the relationship between trade unions and the general public is represented. Specifically, trade unions have come to see and represent themselves as providers of a service to the public, rather than

as production workers. Language is of crucial importance to this shift. Thus the public are referred to almost universally as 'service users'. The choice of this term is deliberate, contrasting as it does with the government's preferred label, 'customer'. The differing ideological connotations of these two descriptions are recognised by the unions and actively used as part of the challenge to the government's policies. This is part of a broad attempt to identify the interests of 'users' with those of trade unionists.

In addition to changes at the level of ideology there were a number of practical developments. The unions' approach changed from an individual to a joint union one. The internal organisational structures of the unions were altered with new committees and research units established to deal with the government's attempts to generalise competitive tendering. Links were formed or strengthened with other organisations such as the Association of Metropolitan Authorities and the Association of Direct Labour Organisations. An increasing weight came to be placed on research and intelligence. Initially this had been limited to gathering press cuttings: by 1989 it had developed to the level of a joint union computerised data base covering the private contracting industry and the progress of compulsory tendering in local government.

These changes occurred gradually and unevenly over a period of years. The impetus for many of them was the unions' campaign to prevent the government introducing the compulsory tendering provisions which were ultimately embodied in the Local Government Act 1988. Before the general election of 1983 there were no signs that the government would move in this direction. However, the new parliamentary intake included Christopher Chope, formerly the leader of Wandsworth Councillor and Michael Forsyth, formerly a councillor in Westminster, and the author of an Adam Smith Institute pamphlet outlining the New Right justification for the private provision of public services.⁶

⁶Forsyth M (1981) *Re-servicing Britain* (London: Adam Smith Institute).

Ascher describes the campaign that these newly elected members waged from the backbenches to persuade the government to force all local authorities to engage in competitive tendering exercises.⁷ However, while the election manifesto had promised to encourage local authorities to pursue tendering, it was not until late in 1984 that the government finally committed itself to formal action.

Meanwhile, the period since the Wandsworth disputes had seen a significant decline in voluntary contracting out by local authorities. The TUC's contribution to the development of a national trade union movement response had been to publish extensive evidence of the failures of private contractors to provide an acceptable service and the intense union publicity campaign may have contributed to an unwillingness among all but the most ideologically committed of local authorities to engage in privatisation.⁸

Despite the high profile opposition, in February 1985 the Government published a Green Paper entitled *Competition in the provision of local authority services*. This document laid out proposals which, if enacted, would compel all local councils and some other public authorities to offer the private sector the chance to compete for the right to provide a number of services commonly provided by direct labour.

The Green Paper proposed that wide powers be given to the Secretary of State to decide which areas of council activity should be subject to enforced tendering. Strict financial accounting procedures would have to be followed by direct service organisations and financial targets (effectively a profitability criterion) would have to be met. Where local authorities chose to award their contracts in-house on a basis that the Secretary of State considered unfair or 'anti-competitive' they could be forced to close their direct labour operation and hand the work to the private sector.

⁷Ascher *op. cit.* pp38-40.

⁸TUC (1984) *Privatisation file 1* (London: TUC); TUC (1984) *Privatisation file 2* (London: TUC).

This move was not entirely unexpected. The unions had already been faced with similar changes in the NHS which had been introduced through the mechanism of ministerial directives. They realised that backbench pressure for legislation was intense. They had also been contending with the provisions of the *Local Government Planning and Land Act 1980*. However the government had learnt from the 1980 Act that recalcitrant authorities would aim to circumvent the intentions of the legislation in various ways and the stricter proposals of the Green Paper were an (in the event partly unsuccessful) attempt to prevent the use of such tactics in the future.

The unions were therefore able to draw on their experiences of compulsory tendering in the NHS and local government building departments as well as the lessons they learnt in Wandsworth and its imitators in developing their respective responses to the new threat. At this stage the unions were still producing their own policies in relative isolation from one another.

GMB

Although it was issued before the detailed provisions of the Green Paper were known, the GMB's privatisation policy was adopted in the context of increasing government pressure on local authorities to adopt tendering.⁹ Like other union policies before it places competitive tendering in the context of a wider shift towards private provision, and stresses the threat to union members involved. Against the government it argues that the financial savings privatisation is claimed to produce are short term and minimal compared with the longer term impact. It insists that the private sector does not provide better quality services, pointing to the level of defaults in local authority contracts. Finally it claims that the government's claim to be rolling back the state involves the replacing of public monopolies by private ones, and does nothing to increase freedom of choice for the consumer.¹⁰

⁹GMB (1984) *Privatisation: GMB policy statement* (Esher: GMB).

¹⁰*Ibid.* pp6-7.

Having stated its objections to privatisation the GMB proceeds to outline its policy to oppose it. In addition to the usual publicity campaign and membership education programmes the union declares its support for industrial action to prevent privatisation 'wherever it is an effective way of resisting privatisation moves'.¹¹ However, in the light of subsequent developments the next clause is the most interesting. It states that:

where there is a possibility of tendering 'in house' by direct labour in order to stop sub contracts going to privateers, the GMB will give every assistance and support to groups of members attempting to put in such tenders in order to preserve their terms and conditions and the quality of the service they provide.¹²

The joint union policy developed at a later date and subscribed to by the GMB is that there should be no involvement of trade unionists in putting in tenders for the 'in house' work. While the development of the joint union initiative was widely seen as crucial for a successful response the difficulties of uniting trade unions with different, and sometimes conflicting material interests, membership bases and political views has meant that in a number of ways joint union action has not been as 'joint' as it was hoped it would be. The GMB's role as a private sector, as well as a public sector union, has been implicated in this. For example in the next paragraph of the 1984 policy document the GMB commits itself to unionising private contractors' workforces, where contracts are lost to the private sector. The ease with which the GMB was able to adopt such a position stems from its long history as a union in the private sector, and from its determination to reverse the dramatic collapse in its membership through aggressive recruitment campaigns. This has laid it open to the charge from some in the labour movement that it has less of a commitment to preventing privatisation than NUPE which has in the past been a solely public sector organisation. It has also been suggested to me that in certain circumstances the GMB has a vested interest in allowing privatisation since that

¹¹*Ibid.* p13.

¹²*Ibid.* p13.

might present it with a new workforce to organise in a service which had traditionally been recruited by another union.

In fact NUPE is also committed to recruiting the workforces of private contractors following a stormy debate at its 1982 conference.¹³ However the differences of interests between the various unions affected by compulsory tendering have sometimes generated practical conflicts at the local level.

NUPE

The GMB's policy statement ranged widely over the whole area of privatisation. NUPE and NALGO both produced detailed and closely argued responses to the Green Paper itself. NUPE's document¹⁴ was subsequently published as a campaign pamphlet titled *Local services: the case against privatisation*.¹⁵ NALGO's arguments are contained in a report from its National Local Government Committee to its 1986 Annual Local Government Group Meeting.¹⁶

NUPE's case against the proposed legislation is set out under six headings.¹⁷ Firstly, the union argues that CCT represents 'a fundamental challenge to the principles of local democracy and to the rights of elected councillors'. Pointing to the limited extent of voluntary contracting out in local government, NUPE draw the conclusion that councils have by and large chosen not to tender, a choice which in the future would be denied them. Secondly, the proposals imply a 'serious reduction in the standard of provision of local services'. Here NUPE cites the failure of private contractors to provide services of an adequate standard.

Thirdly, the so-called financial savings will be more than offset by the costs of the tendering process, supervising contractors and redundancy pay. The union

¹³NUPE (1982) 'Report ...' *op. cit.* pp177-84.

¹⁴NUPE (1985) *Evidence submitted by the National Union of Public Employees on the Consultation Paper 'Competition in the provision of local authority services'* (London: NUPE) mimeo.

¹⁵NUPE (1986) *Local services: the case against privatisation* (London: NUPE).

¹⁶NALGO (1986) *Fighting privatisation in local government* (London: NALGO).

¹⁷NUPE (1986) *op. cit.* pp4-5.

points out that in any case savings can only come through cuts to standards, cuts to pay or greater efficiency. It is opposed to reducing standards and suggests that, at £101.25 per week, the then top pay rate for a local council manual worker on national pay scales 'cannot be seen as excessive'. On the question of increases in efficiency the union argues that while they are always welcome, there is no evidence that the policy of 'competition' will produce more efficient services.

Fourthly, the proposals would see a deterioration in industrial relations in the local authority sector. Fifthly, elected councillors will lose control over the provision of the services for which they are responsible. Finally it was suggested that the change would have a deleterious effect on the local economic situation, through higher unemployment, lost tax revenues and higher social security benefit payments.

Unsurprisingly, since this document was prepared as evidence on the government's proposals, it makes no reference to the sort of left critique of local services developed by SCAT. This gap was filled in 1987 with the publication of *Better services*.¹⁸ This pamphlet was predicated on the assumption that a successful defence of the public sector can only be mounted on the basis of a commitment to improve on existing standards of provision. Citing the involvement of SCAT in developing local initiatives, this document describes a range of case studies of attempts to make services more responsive to users and more open to the involvement of workers in the running of them.

NALGO

The response of NALGO is significant because, at least initially, NALGO members were not directly the targets of CCT.¹⁹ The importance NALGO placed on developing a policy of opposition to the legislation reflected the union's perception of CCT as a wider threat to the principles of public service provision. NALGO

¹⁸NUPE (1987) *Better services* (London: NUPE).

¹⁹NALGO *op. cit.*

identified many of the same objections to the proposals as NUPE. It identifies women workers, disabled workers, workers who are members of ethnic minorities and lesbian and gay workers as particularly at risk from the changes.²⁰

To counter the government's objectives, NALGO proposed its own:

- to return to direct labour all services which have been privatised and to reverse cuts which have been made in services;
- to prevent any further privatisation or cuts;
- to increase, improve and expand local government services, and make them more responsive; and to defend the democratic accountability of services;
- to defend, and wherever possible to increase and improve, jobs, pay and conditions of service;
- to increase NALGO membership and influence;
- to win equal opportunities, in all respects, as employees and as users, for women, black people, people with disabilities, gay men and lesbians.²¹

Paragraph 5.4 of the document outlines a strategy which is very similar to the seven-point plan discussed above. Interestingly it includes the statement that 'in-house tendering cannot [...] be a viable tactic except in the very last resort'. This position seems to contradict the commitment of the GMB to 'giving every assistance' to such initiatives.²²

The strategy is based (as is SCAT's) on the view that in the past services have not necessarily had the support of their users:

Privatisation adversely affects both the users of services and the workforce. Their interests therefore, far from being opposed to each other as the advocates of privatisation claim, are in fact mutual. In view of this our actions must centre upon transforming this unity of interest into unity of purpose and unity of action. However, we cannot achieve this by viewing 'users' as passive bodies with whom there can be temporary ad hoc alliances when there is a problem, more or less disregarding them at other times. Neither can we ignore the fact that the scope, quality and character of many services are often held in very low esteem by those who rely upon them.²³

The key paragraph marking the explicit adoption by one of the unions of a crucial aspect of the thinking which prompted the seven-point plan then follows.

Unlike the rest of the document it is printed in bold type for emphasis:

The National Committee is of the opinion that this problem needs to be confronted, and a first step in doing so is to state clearly and baldly that NALGO is not in the business of

²⁰*Ibid.* paragraphs 4.8-4.14.

²¹*Ibid.* paragraph 5.2.

²²GMB *op. cit.* p13.

defending the indefensible. Insofar as many services are of poor quality, too narrow in their scope and unresponsive to the wishes of their users, NALGO must be prepared not only to say so but to set out to improve, expand and develop them and make them more responsive to people's needs.²⁴

The report went on to spell out in a degree of detail the action that should be taken at national, district and branch levels as part of the campaign against both the Green Paper and the threat of privatisation more generally.

NALGO subsequently produced a 'campaign handbook' in the form of a loose leaf binder which provided branches with practical advice on campaigning strategies and tactics. There are sections on, for instance, lobbying parliament, gaining publicity, direct action, and campaigning with other unions and with user groups and voluntary organisations.²⁵

Towards a joint policy

In a variety of ways, then, trade unions were responding to the government's increasing commitment to competitive tendering and privatisation in ways which involved the more or less explicit adoption of the sort of approach originally advocated by SCAT. However it is important not to elide union *policy* and union *action*. In the first place official union policy is only one aspect of the political processes of the labour movement. Much of the formulation and effectiveness of such policies depends on more or less informal and complex processes of conflict, negotiation, compromise and happenstance within and between the various union organisations. By their nature these aspects of trade unionism are more difficult for an external researcher to gain access to than the public pronouncements and formal documentation. However, they are crucial to the actual development of trade union practices. Secondly, policy may be generated and approved at the national level, but this does not necessarily mean that it will be implemented by local branches (or

²³NALGO *op. cit.* paragraph 5.6.

²⁴*Ibid.* paragraph 5.7.

²⁵NALGO (undated) *Fighting privatisation in local government: campaign handbook* (London: NALGO) looseleaf binder.

if it comes to it by the national executive committees). When I asked one of the architects of the seven-point plan what he thought of the union policies on competitive tendering he said ruefully that 'everyone knew the words, but no-one knew what to do with it, so you could get up in conference and say it and that was right on, but no-one actually put it into practice'.²⁶ As I shall show in the Chapter Six this was something of an exaggeration, but it indicates that there is no automatic translation from policy into practice.

To take the former point in more detail, I have been able to identify a number of ways in which informal processes appear to have been changing in response to the development of competitive tendering and privatisation. While the unions publicly were publishing their own individual policy responses to the government's proposals, 'behind the scenes' there were moves to develop a joint union response. A senior member of NUPE's national leadership told me that before 1982 there had been very little joint union action of any sort in local government. However, once unions began to develop their individual policies on privatisation it became clear that there was 'virtually no difference' between them.²⁷ In fact as I have already suggested there were a number of differences (for example on union involvement in tendering processes) however after some initial internal debates all the unions had rejected both the strategy of a national strike, and the idea that local authority officers should refuse to implement the legislation.

The campaign of resistance to the Green Paper was on the surface a traditional affair with publicity drives and general propaganda. Informally, however, the unions had been lobbying Conservative councillors around the country who were widely opposed to the idea of enforced tendering. The pressure this exerted within the Conservative Party may explain in part why it took so long for legislation to be drawn up after the appearance of the Green Paper.

²⁶Interview with the author, 3 November 1989.

²⁷Interview with the author, 30 January 1990.

Parliament was originally scheduled to discuss the proposals during the 1986/7 session, but in the event publication of the Bill was postponed until after the election. Sir Paul Beresford, the leader of Wandsworth Council, told me that in his view the Conservative-controlled shire districts were in some ways bigger obstacles to the government's programme than the Labour authorities of inner London.²⁸ The same senior NUPE officer told me that as part of the campaign the unions were apparently feeding the local government press with information to 'ensure fair coverage'.

However this campaign effectively ended in 1987 with the re-election of the Thatcher Government for a third consecutive term. Although legislation had been postponed for over two years the unions realised that it could no longer be prevented. Having previously realised that they might be faced with such a situation after the election, the unions, through the informal political processes alluded to, had been developing the basis of a joint approach. The NUPE officer I spoke located the source of this in an apparently separate development. In 1985 the officers with responsibility for local government services in each of the three major manual unions had come together to discuss the long term position of manual workers pay.

It was felt that the pursuit of traditional pay claims by traditional means had led to a steady erosion of the gains that had been made during 1978 and 1979. These officials therefore decided to adopt a new approach. The recent Equal Pay Act, which compels employers to pay men and women equally for doing work of equal value, was thought to be flawed, but it was thought that the employers were worried about its implications in local government where many jobs are done by women for substantially lower wages than those paid to men doing work of apparently equal value. In late 1985, the unions persuaded the employers to engage in a regrading of local authority manual workers' jobs on the basis of equal pay for

²⁸Interview with the author, 12 March 1990.

work of equal value.

According to the interviewee, the unions had a hidden agenda on privatisation. In line with the sort of thinking described above, they thought that in order to fight competitive tendering local government had to change. This in turn would require a considerable shake up of the bureaucracies and entrenched practices of local authorities and trade unions, and of the attitudes of union members. The huge regrading exercise would have this sort of effect by introducing a degree of turmoil into the system and lead to the removal of a lot of dead wood among full-time union officers and lay activists. Many people who had been serving their time for years in minor positions in the union were impelled to resign, their places being taken, or so it was hoped, by more enthusiastic replacements. It is impossible to establish whether this turmoil was in fact the premeditated outcome of the regrading exercise, or an unintended consequence for which I was given a post-hoc rationalisation. Nonetheless, it did have a significant effect as many of the more junior officials of all the trade unions involved told me in various parts of the country.

This sort of informal political process was thus of considerable importance in the development of a common approach to the threat of compulsory tendering. The first joint union action directed specifically towards the proposed legislation was also of this informal nature. The document *Don't panic!* which provides advice to local government councillors and officers on dealing with the CCT was published in 1988.²⁹ Although it makes no formal mention of union involvement during its drafting, the trade unions affected were participants in its preparation from 1986 (as was SCAT).

Thus the period of the campaign against the proposals of the Green Paper was a period in which the trade unions' formal policies converged, and their links with each other and other organisations were strengthened through mainly informal

²⁹AMA, LGIU, LSPU and ADLO (1988) *Don't panic!* (London: AMA *et al.*).

political processes. This was also a time when new organisational structures began to develop and research units were established. At the same time the content of union policies was evolving in a direction which increasingly saw union members as service providers, and the nature and quality of public services as the proper focus for union campaigns which should be conducted jointly with service users.

Who cares wins and beyond

These various developments meant that once the CCT proposals had been embodied in the *Local Government (No 2) Bill 1987* the unions were able to produce joint policy proposals on how to deal with the legislation. Initial calls from the ultra-left in the labour movement to base the campaign on a refusal to implement the legislation, backed by mass industrial action, were defeated. Instead the unions developed a sophisticated strategy drawing on the experience of competitive tendering in the National Health Service, individual union policies and the SCAT initiative. All the four union conferences agreed to adopt the proposals as policy. The result, published in 1988, was *Who cares wins: a trade union guide to compulsory tendering for local services*.³⁰

In this document the unions argue that they should aim to work with local authorities to minimise the threat to local government trade unionism. The cornerstone of this strategy was a rejection of the view that 'cutting services, jobs, wages and working conditions is the only way to win contracts' in-house.³¹ By contrast, the unions claim that it is possible to maintain and improve the quality of public services and retain service production in-house, while simultaneously defending the jobs, pay and conditions of the workforce and promoting equal opportunities. Furthermore the aim of defending the jobs and conditions of the workforce is to be achieved *by means of* maintaining and improving the quality of

³⁰GMB, NUPE, NALGO and TGWU (1988) *Who cares wins: a trade union guide to compulsory tendering for local services* (London: GMB et al.).

³¹*Ibid.* p11.

services.

It is thus implicitly accepted by the unions that if cost is the only criterion, the private sector will win a majority of contracts. A trade union researcher expressed it graphically: 'this is called the 'limbo dance' of getting beneath the contractor's bid. [...] One doesn't try and go beneath the contractors, because the contractors can always understep an in-house bid. [...] So the idea is that one provides a better service'.³² A full-time union organiser in Newcastle confirmed this view: 'competition has got to be on the basis of quality, rather than cost, because we can't compete on the basis of cost, (certainly in building cleaning). Because there will always be people prepared to take jobs for £1.60 an hour, or even less'.³³

If it is not possible to compete on cost with the private sector, the alternative is to compete on quality. The mechanism for implementing CCT provides a vehicle for doing this: the specification. A principal objective of the trade union policy described in *Who cares wins* is to exert union influence on the drawing up of service specifications. This is to ensure that specifications are stringent both in their detail and in the level and quality of service required. The unions believe that this will give local authority Direct Service Organisations (DSOs) a competitive advantage over private contractors, since private contractors aim to compete largely on cost. This may of course change if contractors become more experienced, and better able to provide a higher quality of service.

The unions also argue that the specification procedure provides an opportunity for authorities to *improve* the quality of the services they provide, although the financial problems faced by local government make this difficult. Carried with this is an explicit acceptance that local authority service delivery in the past has often been of poor quality, unresponsive to the needs of users, and bureaucratised. Thus, as in the SCAT strategy, it is recognised that the 'New

³²Interview with the author, 7 March 1989.

³³Interview with the author, 14 July 1989.

Right' critique of local government services as bureaucratic and unresponsive contains some truth.

There is also a recognition that despite the iniquities and dangers of the CCT legislation, it has had the function of bringing the issue of local government service cost and quality to the fore, which otherwise showed few signs of happening outside a few specific authorities. One trade union employee said, 'I do not think that [CCT] is the way to go about [an] audit of the provision of council services, on the other hand it is administering an enormous kick up the backside to a lot of people who will benefit from a bit of a shake-up'.³⁴

The unions have identified a number of tactics open to authorities in building an emphasis on quality into the specification. For example the specification can insist that employees have a certain level of training, or have obtained certain qualifications. This is true even for the so-called 'cinderella service' of building cleaning, where the British Institute of Cleaning Science runs training courses for cleaners. Of course an authority would need to ensure that it's own workforce can meet the criteria, and if necessary provide training so that they do. The unions' hope is that by setting the standards of work required by specifications high enough, the in-house bid will be the only one which can fulfil the contract. Thus in-house bids will win even if they are not the cheapest.

The unions argue that the best way to exert union influence on the content of the specification is through 'positive partnership with councils'³⁵ and suggest persuading councils to adopt a joint statement of policy with the unions.³⁶ In the (Conservative-controlled) London Borough of Enfield, for example, a joint union/council agreement has been reached giving trade unions extensive rights of consultation and participation in the compulsory tendering process.³⁷ (Although

³⁴Interview with the author, 7 March 1989.

³⁵GMB *et al.*, *op. cit.* p11.

³⁶*Ibid.* p16.

³⁷LGIU (1988) *Involving unions in compulsory tendering* (London: LGIU) p22.

some trade unionists I spoke to saw risks in developing too close a working relationship with the employers.)

The unions recognise, however, that the tactic of influencing specifications is likely to succeed only where authorities are reasonably sympathetic to the policy of winning the contract in-house without worsening terms and conditions. Where this is not the case the unions' argue that the option of industrial action must be considered to put pressure on the authority. 'When councils won't listen to union and community approaches aimed at maintaining good quality services, union members may need to consider whether industrial action would be an appropriate means of putting pressure on the council'.³⁸

Once the specifications have been set and contractors invited to inspect them, some authorities may draw up an 'approved list' of contractors. Unions may seek to influence this by using information on the past activities of contractors in publicity campaigns. Similarly, the unions advocate using to the fullest all the provisions of the Act which allow contractors who have submitted tenders to be vetted for financial integrity, track record and so on. This is a management, not a union, responsibility, but the unions advise that local branches should check that this is being done thoroughly, and if necessary provide extra intelligence on companies. One local union officer placed considerable emphasis on the role of a computer database containing information on contract service companies in the region: 'We ... push these [company profiles] out to branches. What we are looking for is contract failures, financial instability. They can then take that to their local authorities and point out the inadequacies of companies in various areas'.³⁹

The in-house bid itself is drawn up by management, and though the unions expect to be informed of the contents of the bid, it is not their policy to be directly involved in pricing the tender. This would clearly seriously compromise their

³⁸GMB *et al.*, *op. cit.* p18.

³⁹Interview with the author, 17 July 1989.

independence from management. However if the tender pricing is acceptable to the unions then they will be prepared to support the bid. Conversely, if it involves labour or other cuts they reserve the right to fight against it, including the use of industrial action where necessary. As the unions put it: 'Councils must recognise that we won't give them a blank cheque'.⁴⁰

The final stage of the process is tender evaluation, in which the various bids are compared and the choice of contractor, or DSO, is made. This again is a management function, but the unions are concerned that it should not be done on the basis simply of cost. SCAT argues that unions should have an input into the tender evaluation to ensure that important non-cost criteria are taken into account.⁴¹ These include compliance with the specification and contract conditions and a check on the technical competence and financial health of the company. The importance of this was stressed by one full time trade union officer I interviewed who was concerned that evaluation had been neglected by unions in the past. Referring to an authority where the in-house bid had lost most of the work to the private sector, he said:

Between the councils and the unions [in the region], the strategy of making the specifications tight has by and large worked. The weakness is that we didn't recognise early on how important tender evaluation was. In a way, that is where [named authority] was a failure. Any proper evaluation would have said that losing 120 jobs to save 12,000 quid was just not worth it.⁴²

Throughout the tendering process, the successful implementation of the unions' policies would seem to depend partly on the unions in an authority having the time and resources required to carry them out. For this reason, a certain amount of stress is placed on the need to negotiate arrangements with management to give unionists time off from work ('facility time') to develop a response to CCT.⁴³ This, like many other aspects of the approach I have been describing, depends on

⁴⁰GMB *et al.*, *op. cit.* p11.

⁴¹SCAT (1989) *Public service practice 1: tender evaluation* (London: SCAT).

⁴²Interview with the author, 17 July 1989.

⁴³GMB *et al.*, *op. cit.* p17.

the local council accepting, or being persuaded to accept, the involvement of the unions in the process. This is one reason why the national trade unions' policy is likely to be subject to substantial local variations.

In addition to the development of joint union policy proposals there are a number of other initiatives in which the unions have been engaged in response to CCT. Perhaps the most significant of these has been the establishment of a Joint Union Privatisation research unit at NUPE's national headquarters in south east London. The unit was set up on the lines of the NHS Privatisation Research Unit. However the establishment of the local government unit was delayed when the GMB declined to sign a joint agreement that participating organisations would not recruit members from one another's ranks for a period of six months from the setting up of the unit. This led to the GMB being excluded from the operation and it now runs its own intelligence operation independently.

The unit, which began work in January 1989, involves NALGO, NUPE, the TGWU and now NUCAPS, following government pressure to introduce competitive tendering to the central civil service. The operation involves collecting and analysing information on private contractors, local councils, the extent and nature of existing contracting out and the progress of CCT through its successive phases. A regular bulletin (*Privatisation News*) is published with articles and data on these issues. The unit also responds to individual requests for information. Local union branches are supposed to direct requests for intelligence through their district officers, although in practice they are not turned away. Local government officers making inquiries in their capacities as employees of the council are told to go through the relevant union organisation. I was told that if the local authority was on good terms with its unions this would not present problems and that if it was not the unit would not wish to provide it with help.

The information disseminated by the unit is used by local union organisations in developing their local response to CCT. For example information (sometimes

commercially sensitive) that a particular private contracting company had a poor financial basis might allow the unions to approach the council and point out the possible dangers of including it on the tender list. The unit has also been able to point out to the national Labour Party that past experience suggests that it is not necessary for Labour-controlled councils to cut services or wages to retain work in house. This is apparently to lead to instructions to Labour councillors from the Party to that effect.

Thus in the formulation of policy, in the content of policy and in research initiatives the unions affected by CCT have undergone a shift from many of the forms of trade unionism inherited from the past. The implementation of these policies varies considerably from place to place and there is therefore no guarantee that a similar shift to that which I suggested in the last chapter began to occur in Wandsworth will take place everywhere. The adoption and implementation of the national joint policy may be inadequate, or the changes at 'the top' may have come too late. To investigate this further it is necessary to focus once more on the shop stewards and local union branches.

6 The geography of local trade union responses

Introduction¹

The national union policies which I have been discussing are an important part of the story of trade union responses to restructuring in local government. However, without concerted locally-based action they are reduced to mere rhetoric. National publicity campaigns against privatisation seem to have only very limited chances of success in the face of determined legislative initiatives by radical right-wing governments. By intervening in the processes of restructuring themselves, on the other hand, individuals and groups can affect how those processes unfold in practice. While a complete change in policy would require at least a change of Government, the effects of a policy can be directly influenced by action on the part of those involved in its implementation.

In this chapter, therefore, I want to examine in some detail how local trade union organisations and the individuals within them have responded to some of the changes with which they have been faced in the local government services sector during the 1980s. I will do this through case studies of local union activity in three local authorities in Newcastle upon Tyne, Manchester and Milton Keynes. I will also, for reasons which will become clear shortly, give further consideration to my case study of Wandsworth which I discussed in Chapter Four.

When I selected these four places for detailed investigation I expected to find considerable differences in the ways in which trade unions had responded in each case, and this was rapidly borne out while I was doing the empirical research.

¹Some parts of this section have been previously published elsewhere in Painter J (1991) 'Trade union responses to local government privatization' *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 16:2 pp214-226.

Initially I felt that the differences between the local responses were significant principally because of the role they could play in developing explanations along realist lines of the character of trade union responses. This role remains of key importance and I will outline the rationale for it and the way such explanations are developed in the next section.

As the research progressed, however, I became more interested in the differences between local responses in their own right, rather than solely in their function as a methodological tool. I thus wanted to explain why these differences arose: why different branches of the same organisations responded to the same national legislation in very varied ways and with divergent consequences. To some extent I found that explaining *variations* in union behaviour involved the same use of the case study approach as did explaining the nature of that action. For example, the case study technique clarifies that the relationship between the local Labour Party and the local trade union organisations is an important influence in trade union action. Since this relationship varies from place to place it is in principle straightforward to identify variations in it as an important influence on the pattern of variation in trade union action. As the research went on, however, I became increasingly convinced that the problem of explaining social action and the geographical variations in it was both of considerable political significance and rather more complex than I had originally envisaged.

The political significance of the variation stems from three factors. Firstly, developments at the local level can have an impact on wider processes. For example, the campaign in Wandsworth had considerable influence in the labour movement around the country. It was widely written about and discussed, and the subsequent formulation of policy took account of problems that had been encountered in Wandsworth.

Secondly, the overall success or failure of the unions' strategies are determined (at least in part) by local variations in the conditions under which they

are implemented. This is, or should be, of considerable political significance to the unions. For example, it may be that some sets of conditions which lead to the failure of union responses in certain areas are ones which unions and/or their members can influence. Other circumstances may be less easy to change, at least in the short term. For example, locally low levels of recruitment can lead to a less than effective responses to privatisation in some areas. This is a problem that unions can tackle immediately. By contrast, wider processes of capital accumulation (which influence the activities of private contractors, for example) are less easy (though not in principle impossible) for unions to confront.

Thirdly, geographical divisions between workers cannot be dismissed as 'regional chauvinism' or 'false consciousness'. Rather, they may be founded on differences in cultural and/or material circumstances. Only by understanding the causes of these differences can any difficulties they may produce be overcome.

The difficulties in explaining geographical variations in trade union action stem in part from the nature of human action itself. It is neither purely voluntaristic and willed by those engaged in it, nor is it completely determined by forces beyond the actors' control. My initial attempts to account for the geography of trade union action were based on the assumption that it could in some sense be 'read off' from the uneven development of society and social relations. I was tempted to argue, for example, that if trade union action in Newcastle was qualitatively different from that in Milton Keynes, then it must be so because of the 'sorts of places' which Newcastle and Milton Keynes are. I think that an argument along these lines still has some validity as my empirical research will suggest. However, identifying the mechanisms which 'link' the nature of particular places with their characteristic forms of trade union action is not a straightforward task. Before discussing the specifics of the case studies, therefore, I will consider in more general terms how a theory of trade union action might deal with geographical variation while avoiding the twin traps of voluntarism and determinism. These arguments will be developed

through a comparison of the concepts of 'locality' and 'locale', but before turning to these I want to deal with the related issue of the role of case studies in explanation.

Case studies and explanation

I have already suggested that the philosophy of critical realism has been of key importance in the development of my account. I now want to substantiate this assertion through a consideration of the practice of what Sayer refers to as *intensive research*. In contrast to the complementary practice of extensive research, which operates solely at the level of patterns of events, intensive research seeks in addition to probe the other levels of realism's depth ontology in order to trace the causal connections between events and their generative structures and mechanisms.

The case study has long been part of the methodological stock-in-trade of the social scientist in general, and the human geographer in particular. Few would object to case studies being included in a research project to describe a phenomenon, or to illustrate a theoretical point. Where case studies are used in the process of explanation, however, their role is more controversial. For some, the use of case studies represents an unfortunate return to an idiographic human geography concerned solely with the uniqueness of places, and uninterested in the (supposedly scientific) exercise of empirical generalisation.

Those who take this view argue that case studies cannot provide explanations. Explanation is held to involve identifying Humean 'laws of constant conjunction', which take the form 'if C then E'. (Where C refers to the initial conditions, and E to the event to be explained.)² The derivation of these laws requires the large-scale observation of sets of similar events and their antecedent conditions. Because a case study is a study of one event, or a unique combination of different events, it cannot provide the data for explanations of this type. Thus

²Gregory D (1978) *Ideology, science and human geography* (London: Hutchinson) pp33-4.

case studies are represented as 'mere' description.

This (frequently unacknowledged) commitment to positivism was the focus of an increasing number of critiques from the early 1970s. Firstly, it was pointed out (by Marxist geographers among others) that the existence of general laws and principles does not necessarily imply the existence of empirical regularities. Thus by analysing the operation of capitalist social relations in space, Marxist research in geography aims to show precisely how it is that the empirically observable *irregularities* of the world are produced by the operation of more general social processes.

Secondly, a number of the critiques of positivism and empiricism accord considerable significance to case studies. In humanistic geography, for example, case studies provide a rich source of data (in qualitative as well as quantitative forms), which are interpreted with the help of hermeneutics and/or literary theory to provide a deeper understanding of senses of place. In contrast, *realist philosophy* sees case studies as providing examples of the operation of social processes in concrete geographical settings, which allow the possibility of causal explanation. For both these approaches case studies are more than 'mere' description. Rather they provide a range of empirical material which can be used to deepen our understanding and explanations of geographical phenomena.

Types of case study and explanation in human geography

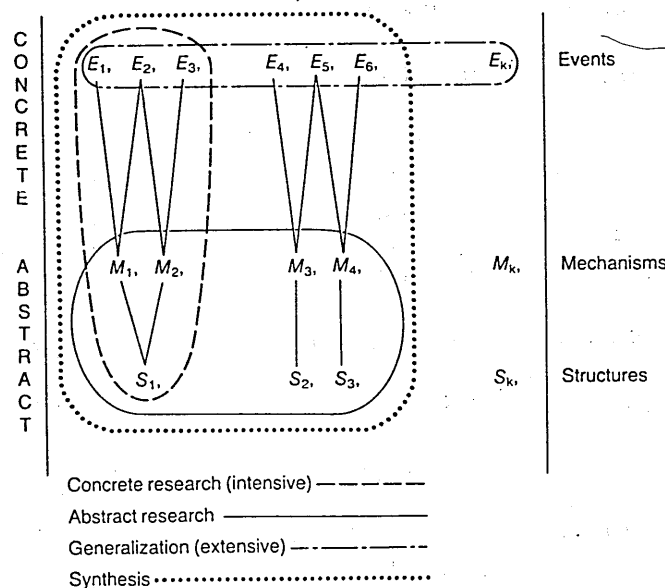
Cases studies can fulfill a number of functions. Firstly, as traditional (idiographic) regional geography recognised, they are of value in themselves. A case study description of a place, or set of events, has intrinsic merit. In 1965 Haggett argued that 'one can do little with the unique except contemplate its uniqueness'.³ Even if this were true, and I aim to show that it is not, the contemplation of uniqueness may nonetheless be interesting.

³Haggett P (1965) *Locational analysis in human geography* (London: Edward Arnold) p3.

Secondly, even when explanation is held to consist in the identification of empirical generalisations, the case study may still be used for illustration. For instance, a case study of part of Bristol might be used to exemplify the generalisation 'inner-city areas are socially deprived'. Here the study is used as a typical case of a population of similar cases.

Thirdly a case study may be made because the phenomenon to be explained is actually unique. Thus the London Borough of Wandsworth has been considered in detail because of the *unique* role that it played in developing a 'New Right' approach to local government in Britain. Here I am not concerned with *generalisation*, but with the more general *significance* of the unique. These justifications for the use of case studies in human geography are all important, but on the whole uncontroversial. I will now consider the claim of critical realism that case studies can form part of the process of explanation itself.

Figure 6.1: Types of research



Sayer's realist approach to social science attempts to go beyond the idiographic/nomothetic dichotomy.⁴ In realism, explaining an event or set of events involves finding out *how it was caused*. Causation is one of the most hotly debated issues in the philosophy of science, and I do not intend to discuss its metaphysics in detail. However a brief outline of how cause is understood in realist epistemology is important because it is so central to explanation.⁵

In Sayer's version of realism, the world is seen as made up of a number of different 'layers'. This is referred to as 'ontological depth'. The 'common sense' view of the world only sees the 'surface' layer: the layer of *events*. The aim of a realist analysis is to uncover in addition the social *structures* and *mechanisms* which are thought to generate these events. (Note that while the concept of depth is central to realism, it is not unproblematic. This is because the analytic category 'structures' does not exist in physical space 'behind' the analytic category 'events'. For this reason it is important to remember that the concepts of 'depth' and 'behindness' are metaphors.) Events are generated when the *causal powers* or *liabilities* of structures are realised through the operation of mechanisms (Figure 6.1).

According to realism, structures possess these causal powers necessarily, by virtue of what they are. The British state, for example, has the power to start a war, because it is in the nature of nation states that they have control over a legitimate means of violence. The British state retains this power regardless of whether it decides to start a war or not. However, the occurrence or otherwise of the event (war) will depend on contingent factors (such as the behaviour of other states, the attitude of the government) and on the relationship between them (such as the attitude of the government towards the behaviour of other states).

Thus explaining a particular set of events involves two interrelated processes.

⁴Sayer A (1984) *Method in social science: a realist approach* (London: Hutchinson).

⁵For a fuller discussion see Sayer *op. cit.* pp94-106.

One is the careful conceptualisation of the structures whose causal powers or liabilities are realised in the event. The other involves concrete research to identify the particular set of contingent factors which enabled that realisation. In the case of the commodification of local government services, for example, a particular local authority has the power to commodify its services. This power may be realised if certain contingent circumstances pertain. These might include national legislation, the commitment of councillors and officers, the resistance or otherwise from users and the responses of trade unions.

The interaction between these various processes occurs *concretely* in particular places. Hence realist explanation of commodification of local government services would proceed in part through detailed studies of specific examples to find out how concrete outcomes were generated by the coming-together of sets of causally-powerful structures in particular places. This concrete research can then re-inform the original conceptual work and the process of explanation can thereby be improved.

This way of thinking of causality and explanation is a powerful critique of the conception of explanation as generalisation. It shows that 'what causes an event has nothing to do with the number of times it has been observed to occur'.⁶ This idea provides the basis of Sayer's distinction between *extensive* and *intensive* research.

Extensive research takes place solely at the level of events. It is concerned with the application of techniques such as large scale social surveys and aims to identify the frequency with which particular types of events occur and the patterns between them. The identification of empirical regularities in this way allows the derivation of Humean 'laws of constant conjunction'. However, for realism and other post-empiricist philosophies of science, these Humean laws do not constitute *explanation*. From a realist perspective, as has been suggested, explanation

⁶*Ibid.* p100.

consists in the identification of the *causal chains* which link structures, mechanisms and events.

By contrast with but complementary to extensive research, intensive research aims to discover *how* the causal powers inherent in social structures are realised as events, under specific contingent conditions. Intensive research thus involves the use of two types of research: *abstract* research and *concrete* research. Sayer is quite clear about the difference between the two:

Abstract theoretical research deals with the constitution and possible ways of acting of social objects and actual events are only dealt with as possible outcomes. [...] Concrete research studies actual events and objects as 'unities of diverse determinations', each of which have been isolated and examined through abstract research.⁷

According to Sayer the main questions in intensive research concern 'how some causal process works out in a particular case or limited number of cases' and the researcher uses 'mainly qualitative methods such as structural and causal analysis, participant observation and/or informal and interactive interviews'.⁸ This suggests that although Sayer does not discuss the use of case studies in detail, they are likely to form an important part of an intensive research programme. It is only through the detailed, qualitative analysis of particular cases that it is possible to identify causal chains, and thereby to explain why events occurred. Similarly, the identification of abstract social structures requires some knowledge of the events of which they are the cause. Thus intensive research using case studies is simultaneously theoretically-informed concrete research, and empirically-informed abstract research. This conception of the role of the case study is very different to those discussed in the preceding section. Here case studies do not only illustrate or exemplify explanations arrived at by other means. For realism they are the means which make explanation possible.

However, this does not mean that explanation through intensive research is

⁷*Ibid.* p216.

⁸*Ibid.* p221.

straightforward. As has been suggested, most accounts of the process of explanation revolve (correctly) around appeals for 'detailed and in-depth conceptual and empirical study'.⁹ Many writers, including Sayer, have tried to show what careful conceptualisation involves. In the case of realism, for example, it consists in the identification of abstract relations of natural necessity. This means that the objects of conceptual enquiry should be grouped together in ways which do not 'divide the indivisible and/or lump [...] together the unrelated and the inessential'.¹⁰ Causal analysis involves identifying *how* these objects of conceptual enquiry are then related to empirical events. To explore what this involves in practice, I have turned to the anthropological literature and to Clyde Mitchell's concept of logical inference.¹¹

Case analysis and logical inference

Mitchell's discussion of case analysis is not grounded explicitly in realist philosophy. However, many of the points he makes resonate with Sayer's conception of explanation. Mitchell defines a case study as 'the documentation of some particular phenomenon or set of events which has been assembled with the explicit end in view of drawing theoretical conclusions from it'. He distinguishes cases studies from other ways of systematically gathering information on the grounds that a case study preserves 'the unitary character of the social object being studied'.

For Mitchell the case study is essentially a heuristic device consisting in 'a detailed examination of an event (or series of related events) which the analyst believes exhibits (or exhibit) the operation of some identified general theoretical principle'.¹² The conclusions that may be validly drawn from the use of case

⁹Massey D and Meegan R (eds) (1985) *Politics and method: contrasting studies in industrial geography* (London: Methuen) p117.

¹⁰Sayer *op. cit.* p127.

¹¹Mitchell JC (1983) 'Case and situation analysis' *Sociological Review* 31:2 pp187-211.

¹²*Ibid.* p192.

studies are of a different order from those that may be drawn from sample-based, extensive research. In sample-based studies, it is assumed that the sample is representative and that its distribution of characteristics reflects those of the parent population. According to Mitchell this form of inference is effective (within given statistical limits) as far as individual characteristics are concerned, but flawed when it comes to specifying the relations between characteristics. For this, *logical* rather than statistical inference is required.

Logical inference is that process 'by which the analyst draws conclusions about the *essential linkage* between two or more characteristics in terms of some systematic schema - some set of theoretical propositions'.¹³ Furthermore, 'we infer that the features present in the case study will be related in a wider population not because the case is representative, but because our analysis is unassailable'.¹⁴ As its name suggests, the *method* of analysis is logical reasoning. Unfortunately, it is in his discussion of logical reasoning that a number of ambiguities seem to me to enter Mitchell's account. In order to explain precisely how it is that the method of statistical inference differs from that of logical (or causal) inference, he draws on Florian Znaniecki's distinction between *enumerative induction* and *analytical induction*. According to Mitchell, enumerative induction is related to the procedures of *statistical* inference, while analytical induction is related to those of *logical* inference.

The object of enumerative induction is to identify characteristics common to all members of a particular class and only to these. This is done in two stages. Firstly the class in question is identified 'by some identifiable, but not necessarily essential characteristics'.¹⁵ Secondly some members of the class are selected and examined to discover which of their features are defining characteristics of the class as a whole.

¹³*Ibid.* p200, emphasis added.

¹⁴*Ibid.* p200.

¹⁵*Ibid.* p201.

By contrast, argues Mitchell, analytical induction does not require that a class is identified before members of it are selected for study. Instead, individual data are studied in order then to assign them to their class(es), thereby describing the essential characteristics of the class(es). As Znaniecki puts it 'analytical induction [...] abstracts from the given concrete case characters that are essential to it and generalises them, presuming insofar as [they are] essential, they must be similar in many cases'.¹⁶

What seems to me ambiguous in Znaniecki's formulation as outlined by Mitchell, is that what he refers to as analytical *induction*, is actually a form of *deduction*. This is because once the *essential* or *necessary* characteristics of an object have been identified, *they must by definition* be present in all members of the same class. Thus if careful examination of instance x_1 leads the analyst to the conclusion that it is a necessary characteristic of x 's that they are y , then the statement 'all x 's are y ' is (a) true, (b) general and (c) a deduction. It is a deduction because it *must* hold regardless of subsequent findings. So if the analyst later finds an instance which is not y , then it cannot be an x either. (Assuming of course that the original analysis was logically sound.)

If we allow for this confusion in the terminology, then Mitchell has presented two distinct logics by which conclusions may be drawn from case study empirical material. In inductive logic, the analyst infers the characteristics of the population from the characteristics of a subset of the population. Deductive logic involves inferring the characteristics of particular individuals from the necessary features of the population.

How then does all this relate to Sayer's account of explanation? It seems clear enough that the statistical procedures which Mitchell identifies as the appropriate method of enumerative induction are part and parcel of what Sayer refers to as extensive research. However, Znaniecki's misnamed concept of

¹⁶Znaniecki, quoted in *ibid.* p201.

analytical 'induction' is not directly analogous with intensive research. If we remember that analytical 'induction' involves the identification of the necessary properties of objects, then it most accurately approximates to that part of intensive research which involves the careful conceptualisation of abstract structures. In other words it is what Sayer refers to as *abstract* research. Analytical 'induction', therefore, does not constitute what Sayer would call explanation. This is because the propositions of analytical 'induction' *must* hold true. They are concerned solely with *necessity*. By contrast, in Sayer's realist account, explanation involves identifying how it was that the necessary properties of objects were realised or not under specific *contingent* conditions. This process is neither induction, nor deduction, but *retroduction*.

Sayer describes retroduction as a 'mode of inference in which events are explained by postulating (and identifying) mechanisms which are capable of producing them'.¹⁷ The relevant question here is thus: 'what structures and mechanisms must exist for the events to occur?' This clarifies how case study research can provide access through unique events to general social processes. While the events which make up the case study may well be unique, they are generated by the operation of processes which potentially operate wherever the structures in question exist. This is why causal analysis (or logical inference) does not require a 'representative' case. Indeed, Mitchell points out that it may be that an unusually *atypical* case is actually better suited to this process of explanation. As he puts it, 'it frequently occurs that the way in which general explanatory principles may be used in practice is most clearly demonstrated in those instances where the concatenation of events is so idiosyncratic as to throw into sharp relief the principles underlying them'.¹⁸

By identifying some of the tensions in Mitchell's account of the use of case

¹⁷Sayer *op. cit.* p97.

¹⁸Mitchell *op. cit.* p203.

studies, I have tried to show more clearly what is specific about the realist conception of explanation adopted by Sayer. What Mitchell's and Sayer's analyses both suggest is that case studies not only *can* be a basis for explaining social phenomena, but also that in a realist account they *should* be that basis.

On doing more than one

Clearly much empirical research in human geography, even in a realist framework, involves studying more than one case, and drawing comparisons between them. When done well, this is much more than listing their differences and similarities. In fact, there are sound methodological reasons why doing two or more case studies enhances the quality of explanation itself.

The first reason for doing comparative work concerns the way causal processes and social structures are identified and explained. Because this relies on the conceptual and logical skills of the researcher as well as on his or her theoretical framework, it is possible for another researcher to study the same case and arrive at a different conclusion about the nature of the causal processes involved. This is partly because reality is complex and the identification of any social structure is necessarily an abstraction from reality. Abstractions have few dimensions, while reality has many. Thus the same reality may be compatible with different abstractions. For example, two researchers in geography might study the distribution of life chances in a particular community. One might decide that the abstraction 'patriarchy' was of key explanatory significance, while the other might conclude that this status should be accorded to 'capitalism'. In this situation, neither is 'wrong'; rather they are both partial accounts. Of course the best research might attempt to combine the two.¹⁹

However, while all explanations are fallible, they are not all equally fallible. Thus the second reason for doing a number of case studies is that this may make

¹⁹Foord J and Gregson N (1986) 'Patriarchy: towards a reconceptualisation' *Antipode* 18:2 pp186-211.

the explanation less fallible. This is because the sets of events which constitute the various studies are generated by the different combination in different places of processes which operate in all. Gaining access to these processes in different combinations can serve to corroborate (or throw doubt on) both the original explanation of the events, and the initial identification of necessary relations and abstract structures.

It was on the basis of these reasons (and some practical ones) that the specific cases were selected. The four local authorities were chosen because I knew, or confidently expected, that the trade union responses in each case would be found to be markedly different from the others. Following the argument outlined above, therefore, I felt that a comparison of them should provide the means for identifying their causes and thus for explaining them. I also considered some of the characteristics of local authorities which seemed likely to be influential in generating types of response, and aimed to select councils which exemplified different combinations of characteristics, again with the object of enabling explanation along the lines suggested. These characteristics are set out in Appendix B. In the event it was the question of political control of the council which was of key significance in making the final selection, together with a partial understanding of the local labour movement's response to change which I derived from initial interviews with key actors in the national labour movement. The four cases are thus: Wandsworth (radical right council), Manchester (radical left), Newcastle (traditional 'moderate' left) and Milton Keynes (centre-right).

Explaining uneven development

To recap, local trade union responses vary significantly from place to place, and from a realist perspective, study of this variation is an important means to constructing explanations of the character of responses. The realist strategy for building causal explanation (whether based on comparative work or not) involves intensive research of which case analysis and the process of retrodution are key

elements.

I have already suggested that my initial interest in the geographical variations in local trade union activity was largely methodological. That is, I saw them as a useful tool for explaining my empirical findings. Increasingly I came to see the geography of trade union responses as significant in its own right, both because of its potential political importance for the trade unions and because of what it implied about the transition to any new mode of regulation. If that transition was to involve, among other things, struggles by private capital to reclaim the 'public sector cities' of Fordism and the strategies developed by trade unions in response, (see Chapter Two above), then I had to take seriously my own insistence that 'geography' was implicated in the development of trade union action itself.

In order to show how this happens I will make two related arguments. The first, following directly from my consideration of Sayer and Mitchell, involves seeing geographical variation as the product of the combination of causal processes in different ways in different places. This perspective can help to clarify how trade union action is geographically *expressed*: a 'weak' version of why geography 'matters'. The second, 'stronger', argument is that trade union is also simultaneously geographically *constituted*. In other words that the places in which it occurs are not passive canvases on which the inexorable logic of wider processes is inscribed but in some sense also have an effect on its development.

In developing these two arguments I have drawn selectively on two literatures. The first is that in which the concept of 'locality' has been developed and debated; the second concerns the concept of 'locale' and the related issue of contextual theory. Before discussing the substantive case studies I want to outline my use of these concepts.²⁰ I should stress that I do *not* see them as alternative

²⁰ Although the material is presented here in this order it is worth pointing out that the process of conceptual analysis occurred partly during and even *after* the empirical research, and indeed stems from my experience of that research.

concepts such that 'acceptance' of one would imply 'rejection' of the other.²¹

Locality

I mentioned above two reasons why comparative research is useful in developing realist explanations. A third reason applies when the phenomenon to be explained is geographical variation itself. To answer the question 'why does x vary in this way' requires not only an explanation of why 'x' is like this here, but also of why it is like that over there. This requires that the differences in the way the causal processes combine are identified, which in turn involves doing case studies in different areas. This reason is suggestive of the close links between realism, the practice of 'locality studies', and the debate surrounding their use(fulness). If causal processes combine differently in different places, then the same general (in the sense of widespread) processes can generate very different local outcomes.

According to Massey, 'the fact of spatial variation in national change [...] had immediate and obvious political importance' during the 1980s. As she puts it, 'it became important to know just how differently national and international changes were impacting on different parts of the country'.²² It was in this context that the idea of locality studies was developed and the proposal drawn up (by Massey) for the ESRC's²³ 'Changing Urban and Regional System' (CURS) research initiative. The research conducted under this programme involved the detailed study of seven 'localities' selected to bring into relief different outcomes of processes of social and economic restructuring. Other research projects with similar or related briefs were also instigated.

Many of the protagonists in the 'locality debate' cite Sayer's realist approach in explaining geographical differences in the outcome of restructuring. In this light

²¹Pace Cooke P (1989) *Localities: the changing face of urban Britain* (London: Unwin Hyman) p10.

²²Massey D (1991) 'The political place of locality studies' *Environment and Planning A* 23:2 p269.

²³Economic and Social Research Council.

'localities' are concrete objects: the products of diverse determinations. Social processes operate across space and combine contingently with one another in different ways in different places to produce the varied character investigated by locality research.

Moreover, concrete outcomes can also influence the operation of wider processes. Geographical differentiation can have an 'impact back' on the forces which generated it, although whether it does so, and what form this takes, is, as Massey points out, an empirical question.²⁴ Paradoxically, this recognition of the effectiveness of spatial form is at odds with Sayer's own treatment of geography. Sayer regards spatial form as a largely contingent phenomenon:

[...] can we abstract content from form and hence have an aspatial science? The answer is a highly qualified yes, as regards abstract theory and an emphatic no as regards research which seeks to explain concrete objects and conjunctures. In so far as the former is concerned with structures and causal powers and mechanisms, but not their effects, it can abstract from the contingencies of spatial form [...]²⁵

Yet the possibility that geographical variation has, as Massey puts it, 'stamped its own imprint on [...] wider processes'²⁶ implies that causal mechanisms may themselves have a geography and thus suggests that space could be important in necessary as well as in contingent relations.²⁷

And this is borne out by my case studies of local trade union action. They suggest, I will argue, that local trade union action in response to processes of restructuring are indeed at least partially the product of local circumstances. However, and this is crucial, I have not been able to identify straightforward causal links between the character of the localities and the action of trade unionists. Moreover, this is, or should be, a relief. I certainly had no wish to discover that political action is directly determined by its environment, even where that

²⁴Massey *op. cit.* p272.

²⁵Sayer *op. cit.* p134.

²⁶Massey *op. cit.* p271.

²⁷For example a multinational company has a necessary geographical form; the nation-state is necessarily linked to a territory.

environment is predominantly a human, rather than a natural one. With hindsight it is clear that any attempt to 'read off' the geography of local action from the unevenly developed patchwork of localities is miscast.

Firstly, using the category of 'locality' would involve tackling the problem from the wrong end. As Massey has indicated the primary focus for locality research was on localities as *outcomes* of other processes. What I am trying to do, I now realise, is to identify the causes and consequences of political action. Secondly, even if those causes could be traced to local phenomena it is far from clear that the concept of locality would clarify how that causality occurs: that it would expose the causal mechanisms.²⁸ This is because a 'locality' is a concrete phenomenon: the 'many-sided' synthesis of multiple determinations. Any attempt to unravel the causal chains generating particular forms of action would inevitably involve unpicking the heterogeneity of the locality in order to identify precisely what it is about Manchester, for example, which contributed to a particular response.

None of this should be read as criticism of locality research conducted on its own terms. I have discussed it here in order to demonstrate how my ideas developed as I tried to interpret the geography of trade union action. I eventually reached the conclusion that what was required for such a task was a *theory of action* which took seriously the significance of the places in which that action developed. Such a theory is not provided by the idea of locality, nor was it intended by those involved in locality research that it should be. For these reasons I want to turn now to Anthony Giddens' concept of 'locale'.

²⁸Phil Cooke has argued that 'localities' can be the sources of political action: a phenomenon which he labels 'pro-activity'. However the nature of the link between local political action and the concept of 'locality' is obscure. If Cooke is claiming that political and social action often occur locally then he is hardly original. If, by contrast, he is claiming (as he seems to be) that there is some necessary characteristic of localities which generates political and social action then it is not clear what this is. See Cooke *op. cit.* pp11-12.

Locale

The concept of 'locale' has been proposed by Giddens as part of his wider project to develop a theory of structuration, and my comments here are not intended as an uncritical endorsement of the whole of Giddens' work. Bearing in mind my comments in the Introduction about the virtues of eclecticism I am happy to draw on aspects of Giddens' theory, particularly since Giddens sees his position as 'compatible with a realist epistemology'²⁹ a compatibility which has been explicitly endorsed by Derek Gregory.³⁰ However, as I shall suggest, there are a number of ambiguities and even inconsistencies in his use of the concept of locale which imply that critical re-working may be more appropriate than straightforward adoption. Some of these difficulties stem from the highly programmatic character of Giddens' definitions and use of the term.

In this context of this study, Giddens' work is interesting because of the central and substantive role it accords to time-space relations in the production, reproduction and transformation of social life. For Giddens, 'time, space and "virtual time-space" (or structure) - the threefold intersection of difference - are necessary to the constitution of the real',³¹ and thus '*social theory must acknowledge, as it has not done previously, time-space intersections as essentially involved in all social existence*'.³²

Giddens argues that his notion of structuration suggests how the flow of human agency 'binds' time and space. The social interactions involved in this are integrative. *Social* integration involves individual actors, while *system* integration involves relations between groups and collectivities. In both cases interactions are situated in time and space and this time-space setting, or context, furnishes the

²⁹Giddens A (1979) *Central problems in social theory* (Basingstoke: Macmillan) p63.

³⁰Gregory D (1982) 'Solid geometry: notes on the recovery of spatial structure' in Gould P and Olsson G (eds) *A search for common ground* (London: Pion) pp189-219.

³¹Giddens (1979) *op. cit.* p55.

³²*Ibid.* p54, emphasis original.

resources on which the actors draw in their interaction. Giddens labels this context 'locale'. In an early formulation he defines it thus:

'Locale' is in some respects a preferable term to that of 'place', more commonly employed in social geography: for it carries something of the connotation of space used as a *setting* for interaction. A setting is not just a spatial parameter, and physical environment, in which interaction 'occurs': it is these elements mobilised as part of the interaction.³³ Features of the setting of interaction, including its spatial and physical aspects [...] are routinely drawn upon by social actors in the sustaining of communication.³⁴

On a number of occasions Giddens refers to locales as the characteristic physical settings associated with different types of collectivities. He writes: 'virtually all collectivities have have a *locale* of operation, spatially distinct from that associated with others'³⁵ and 'all collectivities have defined *locales* of operation: physical settings associated with the "typical interactions" composing those collectivities as social systems'.³⁶ What Giddens has in mind here are the sort of typical physical institutional arrangements associated with particular types of organisations. Thus the typical locale of the school is the classroom; that of the prison, the cell block; that of the bureaucracy, the office; that of the army, the barracks.³⁷

However, in *The constitution of society*, Giddens distinguishes between *organisations* and *social movements* and claims that '[u]nlike organizations, social movements do not characteristically operate within fixed locales'.³⁸ In addition, he claims that '[t]he labour movement [...] is in certain ways prototypical of contemporary social movements',³⁹ and this might appear to suggest that the

³³This notion that locales are mobilised as part of an interaction (and thereby become partly constitutive of action) contradicts Cooke's (mis)reading of Giddens. Cooke claims that the idea of local should be rejected because, *inter alia*, 'it reproduces the passive connotations of community in the way it refers to setting and context for action rather than as a constituting element in action'. (Cooke *op. cit.* p10.)

³⁴Giddens (1979) *op. cit.* pp206-7.

³⁵*Ibid.* p206.

³⁶Giddens A (1981) *A contemporary critique of historical materialism. Vol. 1: Power, property and the state* (Basingstoke: Macmillan) p39.

³⁷Giddens A (1987) *Social theory and modern sociology* (Cambridge: Polity) pp153-162. The specific chapter concerned was originally presented as a lecture in 1984.

³⁸Giddens A (1984) *The constitution of society* (Cambridge: Polity) pp204.

³⁹*Ibid.* pp204-5.

concept of 'locale' is of no relevance to a study of trade unionism. Elsewhere, however, Giddens makes it clear that he means the concept of locale to have 'very general applicability'⁴⁰ and that it applies in principle to all social interaction. The reason for stressing the typical locales of certain types of institutions (barracks, schools etc) is that *in some cases* locales can take on a fixed physical form, but that this form does not completely specify the nature of a locale, and indeed some locales may not have a physical form in that sense at all:

Locales provide for a good deal of the 'fixity' underlying institutions, although there is no clear sense in which they 'determine' such 'fixity'. It is *usually* possible to designate locales in terms of their physical properties, either as features of the material world or, more commonly, as combinations of those features and human artefacts. But *it is an error to suppose that locales can be described in those terms alone [...]* A house is grasped as such only if the observer recognizes that it is a 'dwelling' with a range of other properties specified by the modes of its utilization in human activity.⁴¹

The idea that 'locale' is applicable to all social interaction introduces, however, a further ambiguity. On the one hand Giddens implies that interactions situated in time-space contexts (locales) necessarily involve the 'co-presence' of the actors.⁴² On the other he stresses that 'locales may range from a room in a house, a street corner, the shop floor of a factory, towns and cities, to the territorially demarcated areas occupied by nation states',⁴³ or to put it, as Nigel Thrift does, more concisely, 'a locale does not have to be local'.⁴⁴ The apparent contradiction here is partially resolved by Giddens' comments on media of communication:

The shifting nature of the relations between the expansion of interaction over space and its contraction over time is obviously part and parcel of the 'time-space convergence' so prominent in the development of the contemporary social world. The global nature of social interaction in the modern era had gone along with the invention of new media reducing the distances involved in presence-availability. The telephone, and television video techniques, do not of course achieve the full presence of parties to interaction characteristic of ordinary 'face-to-face' encounters, but they do permit immediacy of time contact across indefinite spatial distances.⁴⁵

⁴⁰Giddens (1981) *op. cit.* p40.

⁴¹Giddens (1984) *op. cit.* p118, emphases added.

⁴²*Ibid.* p71.

⁴³*Ibid.* p118.

⁴⁴Thrift N (1983) 'On the determination of social action in space and time' *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 1:1 p42.

⁴⁵Giddens (1981) *op. cit.* p40.

This perspective is reiterated in *The constitution of society*:

Although the 'full conditions of co-presence' [a quotation from Erving Goffman - JP] exist only in unmediated contact between those who are physically present, meditated contacts that permit some of the intimacies of co-presence are made possible in the modern era by electronic communications, most notably the telephone.⁴⁶

And again:

All social interaction is situated within time-space boundaries of co-presence (whether or not this be extended via media such as letters, telephone calls etc.).⁴⁷

However, elsewhere Giddens insists that 'co-presence' must involve literal 'face-to-face' interaction:

Interaction in contexts of co-presence obviously has characteristics not found in 'meditated' interaction — via the telephone, recordings, the mail and so on.⁴⁸

Similarly,

interaction in contexts of co-presence, as face-to-face interaction, has definite properties which distinguish it from interaction with absent others. 'Absent others' include those who are 'absent in time' as well as those 'absent in space'.⁴⁹

Although I think that there is a genuine confusion here, it seems fairly clear that Giddens does regard a 'locale' as something which can have (potentially considerable) spatial and temporal extension. The interactions for which locales form the setting can therefore in principle be 'time-space distanciated'. Time-space distanciation refers to the 'stretching' of social relations over time and space and can operate through the mechanisms of either social or system integration, or both.⁵⁰ That is to say, distanciated relations may be produced and reproduced either through practices which involve the co-presence of actors, or through those which do not, or through the 'intermingling' of relations of presence and absence.⁵¹

⁴⁶Giddens (1984) *op. cit.* p68.

⁴⁷*Ibid.* p332. See also Giddens (1979) *op. cit.* p103.

⁴⁸Giddens (1987) *op. cit.* p137.

⁴⁹*Ibid.* p146.

⁵⁰Giddens (1984) *op. cit.* p377.

⁵¹Giddens (1981) *op. cit.* p38.

The social interactions which constitute trade union activity, I will propose, all involve the intermingling of present and absent actors in and through a whole variety of different locales of various sizes. These locales may not have an obvious physical expression, but they do have a geography. Without understanding this geography, we can never fully understand the constitution of trade union action.

Having clarified my reading of Giddens' work I now want to explain how they can be helpful in analysing the relationships between the development of trade union action and its geographical context.

Trade union action in context: the role of institutions

As I have suggested, in Giddens' schema the labour movement, or specific trade unions, are not thought to operate in fixed locales. I take this to mean that there is no typical institutional setting for trade union activity in the way that a classroom forms the locale of the activity of teaching. This does not imply, however, that trade union action is context-free and I want to suggest that all trade union activities (and all other social action, for that matter) are situated in locales, but that different activities involve different locales. Moreover, apart from that aspect of trade union activity which is directed towards the internal running of the organisation, all action involves interaction between the union (or individuals or groups within it) and other institutions⁵² (or individuals or groups).

This means that the locale of union action is that setting which links the activities of the institutions or individuals concerned, or, more accurately, the context of union action *is the relationship between the institutions*. Now, this means that in most cases the locale of union action does not have a physical expression, in this sense of a building or fixed form, but as Giddens points out, such an expression is not necessary, only 'usual'.⁵³

As I have suggested, the concept of 'locale' carries with it the notion that the

⁵²Including other unions.

⁵³Giddens (1984) *op. cit.* p118.

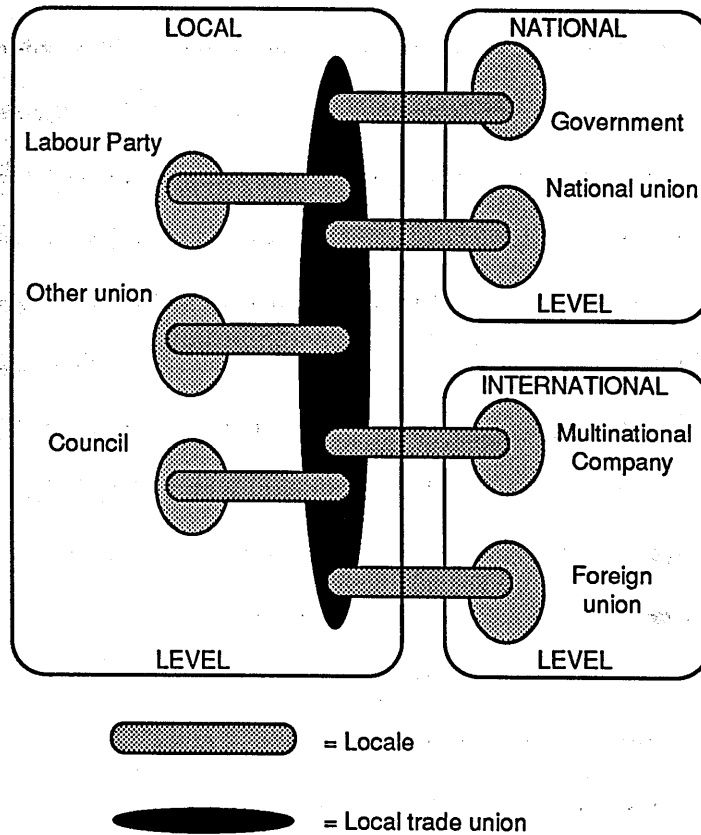
characteristics of settings are mobilised by actors in interaction. Its use here, therefore, is intended to emphasise the ways in which the *institutional contexts* of trade union action provide the *resources* for that action. Moreover, in the light of my empirical research, and as I aim to show in the next sections, it is these institutional contexts and their associated resources which are the key determinants of trade union responses. Consequently differences in the pattern of institutional relations between different places provide the principal explanation for geographical variations in those responses.

Local trade union activity can thus be seen as enmeshed in and constituted through a network of institutional relationships each of which forms a locale through which action is resourced. The geography of the network is likely to be complex, especially where trade unions are powerful organisations with many links to local, national and international institutions. Trade union action at the local level is not therefore purely the product of local phenomena, but it is always constituted through relationships (locales) which link the local level to wider circumstances.

The key connections in the network of locales are a matter for empirical investigation and will vary from place to place. In the case studies that follow I will discuss the significant relationships in each example. However the metaphor of the network may be illustrated through the schematic example shown in Figure 6.2.

These ideas seem to me to be entirely compatible with regulation theory and specifically with the concept of a mode of regulation. As I described in Chapter Two, the mode of regulation involves the contingent coming together of particular institutional forms. What I am proposing here is that understanding the role of political and social action (including struggle) in reproducing and potentially transforming those institutions involves examining the 'fine grain' as it were of the relationships between them.

Figure 6.2: Institutions and locales



Trade unions are continuously involved in what Giddens' refers to as the 'reflexive monitoring'⁵⁴ of their situation and use the knowledge this gives them to influence the future development of their own and other organisations. This means that the network of locales does not *determine* action. Rather it provides a set of resources on which unions and their members draw selectively in developing their strategies. By implication this means that each network also denies its trade union other resources. Locales are thus the enablers and constrainers of social action, and therefore are implicated in the 'duality of structure' which forms the keystone of the theory of structuration.⁵⁵

What I aim to do in the case studies which follow is a form of what Giddens'

⁵⁴*Ibid.* pp5-6.

⁵⁵*Ibid.* pp25-9.

refers to as 'the analysis of strategic conduct':

In the analysis of strategic conduct the focus is placed upon modes in which actors draw upon structural properties in the constitution of social relations. The analysis of strategic conduct means giving primacy to discursive and practical consciousness, and to strategies of control within defined contextual boundaries. Institutionalized properties of the settings of interaction [or locales - JP] are assumed methodologically to be 'given'. We have to take care with this, of course, for to treat structural properties as methodologically given is not to hold that they are not produced and reproduced through human agency. It is to concentrate analysis upon the contextually situated activities of definite groups of actors.⁵⁶

It is important to stress that the concept of 'resources' in these formulations involves a broad definition of that term. It includes not only material resources, but also cultural and ideological ones. The existence of a particular institutional relationship may be a resource in itself, by virtue of the ease of access it provides to decision makers in a local authority, for example. Similarly the reproduction through time of certain relationships may furnish ideological resources in developing action. For example a long standing relationship of cooperation between the trade unions and the Labour Party in a particular place might provide ideological or cultural resources in the sense that cooperation with the Labour Party can be represented 'as the way we do things here' and hence as somehow natural. Relationships between institutions which have been reproduced over time are embodied as knowledge in the minds of individuals and provide the practical understandings which predispose actors to one course of action or another.

This interpretation of the relationship between knowledge and resources provides the basis for a rigorous account of the role of 'tradition'. Many interpretations of the geography of trade unionism refer to the particular labour movement traditions of different regions or localities and to the related concept of local political cultures.⁵⁷ It is frequently far from clear, however, how 'traditions' have causal power. References to tradition cannot explain why contemporary

⁵⁶*Ibid.* p288.

⁵⁷For example Sunley P (1990) 'Striking parallels: a comparison of the geographies of the 1926 and the 1984-85 coalmining disputes' *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 8:1 pp35-52. Sunley argues that the particular geography of industrial action in the miners' strike of 1984-5 can best be understood as reflecting the continued influence of sets of local labour movement traditions stretching back to the 1926 strike.

union activity takes the form that it does, since there is no necessary reason why trade unionists should always do what is 'traditional'. The problems of this sort of account are highlighted by the situation in which action *fails* to conform to tradition. If action 'A' which is *not* 'in character' is not explained by local culture on what grounds can we assume that action 'B' which *is* 'in character' *can* be so explained?⁵⁸

Seen as shared understandings of what is appropriate behaviour and action for trade unions and trade unionists, which are given practical expression in routinised (and therefore partly *unmonitored*) social activity, traditions are one form of ideological resources on which actors can draw. The existence of many other resources and the choices which actors are able to make in mobilising different resources for different purposes emphasises that the category 'tradition' needs careful unpicking if it is to be useful in developing explanations.

The 'complete' context of trade union action at the local level is therefore the 'intersection' of the various locales through which specific relationships are generated and reproduced. Contextual theory, of which Giddens' is a foremost proponent, involves locating actors and groups of actors in the midst of the contingent relationships in which their actions quite literally 'take place'. It is this perspective which I will use to inform the interpretation of my substantive case studies.

⁵⁸Mike Savage has argued something similar in respect of political parties. Savage M (1989) 'Whatever happened to red Clydeside' in Anderson J and Cochrane A (eds) *A state of crisis: the changing face of British politics* (London: Hodder and Stoughton) pp231-243.

Walking the tightrope: Manchester and Newcastle

Manchester City Council

With the reorganisation of local government in 1974, Manchester City Council was formed as one of the ten metropolitan district councils which made up the Greater Manchester Metropolitan County Council. The abolition of the metropolitan counties in 1986 left Manchester with a single tier of elected local government. The case study presented here is of Manchester City Council which shares the administration of central Manchester with Salford and Trafford District Councils.

The city of Manchester

The history of Manchester in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was inextricably linked with the cotton industry:

In the early eighteenth century, Manchester was a small market town with about 10,000 inhabitants. It lacked corporate status. In addition there were no craft guilds and few restrictions on industrial development. It was also located in a region with a high density of population, limited agricultural potential, and a lack of industrial employment, but a material environment supplying pure water and coal fuel which were essential for the bleaching, dyeing, and printing of cotton, and which could be used for industrial power. As a result, the region was ideally suited as a base for the development of the cotton industry, while Manchester was well placed to act as a commercial centre from which a putting-out system could be organised. [...] By the first decade of the nineteenth century the cotton industry had become the most important manufacturing industry in Britain, and cotton had overtaken woollen cloth as the most important export. [...] By 1851 [Manchester's] population had reached 400,000.⁵⁹

Frederick Engels, writing at the height of Manchester's prosperity, emphasises the role of commerce:

Manchester contains, at its heart, a rather extended commercial district, perhaps half a mile long and about as broad, and consisting almost wholly of offices and warehouses. Nearly the whole district is abandoned by dwellers, and is lonely and deserted at night; only watchmen and policemen traverse its narrow lanes with their dark lanterns.⁶⁰

As these observations suggest, Manchester was never purely an industrial city, and with the steady decline in the textile industry from the early years of the

⁵⁹Dunford M and Perrons D (1983) *The arena of capital* (London: Macmillan) pp268-9.

⁶⁰Engels F (1973, first German edition 1845) *The condition of the working class in England* (London: Lawrence and Wishart) p77.

twentieth century its significance as regional service centre was enhanced. More recent developments have added impetus to this shift. Deindustrialisation and industrial restructuring, particularly during the economic crisis of the 1970s, stripped industrial jobs in other manufacturing sectors, and increased the relative significance of the service sector.

Furthermore, a large proportion of jobs in the category of 'other services' are in the public services sector. This, combined with safe Labour Party control of local government (77 out of 99 seats on Manchester City Council were Labour in 1989), a strong trade union movement in both the private and public sectors, a steady increase in the proportion of households in council housing (from 25.4% in 1961 to 47.1% in 1981⁶¹) and a heavy dependence on social security benefits,⁶² identifies Manchester as both an archetypal 'public sector city' and one of the 'spaces for labour' established during the period of Fordism. This does not mean, of course, that capital was absent from Manchester during this period. However, compared with many other places, labour, in part through the density of its network of institutional locales, had considerable power in Manchester; a power which can only be fully understood as the coming together of a range of contingently related factors.

Notwithstanding the increasing significance of services in the Manchester economy after the Second World War, manufacturing industry continued to be of considerable importance, even if it was no longer completely dominated by the textiles sector. The manufacturing sector was well organised industrially and included one of the major heartlands of female trade unionism. The proportion of women in paid employment in the North West of England has consistently been

⁶¹Manchester Planning (1987) *Manchester's population in the mid 1980s* (Manchester: Manchester City Council) p36.

⁶²The proportion of the population dependent on supplementary benefit was 18% in 1979. By 1987 this had risen to 33%. In 1987 52.3% of children attending Manchester schools were entitled to free school meals. (Manchester Planning *op. cit.* pp74-75.)

amongst the highest of any region in the country⁶³ and this was largely due to the predominance of cotton, with its high proportion of women workers. Before the war, Manchester had also developed as a centre for trade unionism among clothing workers, again including many women.⁶⁴ Male-dominated unionism in engineering was also significant with Lancashire forming one of the heartlands of the then Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers.⁶⁵

Hilary Wainwright argues that this particular local mix of trade union histories is central to the institutionalisation of the politics of the labour movement in Manchester.⁶⁶ In contrast with her other case study of Sheffield, the dominant unions in Manchester after the Second World War did not place a high priority on getting their people elected at the municipal level, preferring to concentrate on influencing the selection of MPs. The separation between the local Labour Party branches and the trades councils in Manchester and Salford stemmed from the *Trades Disputes Act 1927* and its restrictions on the political activities of trade unions. Increasingly the engineering unions, in particular, became linked to the Communist Party, rather than the Labour Party. In addition Manchester's role as a service centre led to a growth in individual membership of the Labour Party among groups who were unlikely to be part of the institutions of the labour movement.

In contrast to Sheffield, the effect was to deprive the Labour Party of a ready source of new political talent willing to serve on the City Council. The Council's Labour Group became dominated by an older generation who were, if not exactly

⁶³Marshall M (1987) *Long waves of regional development* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education) pp125-6.

⁶⁴Dobbs SP (1928) *The clothing workers of Great Britain* (London: Routledge) pp48-55 and pp133-135. Dobbs notes that although the major craft union of the interwar years, the politically conservative The Amalgamated Society of Tailors and Tailoresses, was formed and had its headquarters in Manchester, the politically radical industrial union, the Tailors' and Garment Workers' Trade Union was particularly strong in the city and included among its objectives the maintenance of a political fund and the education of its members on 'independent working class principles'.

⁶⁵Massey D and Miles N (1984) 'Mapping out the unions' *Marxism Today* May pp19-22. The AUEW is now the Amalgamated Engineering Union.

⁶⁶Wainwright H (1987) *Labour: a tale of two parties* (London: The Hogarth Press) pp114-126.

reactionary, were old-fashioned in their politics. At the same time the local Labour Parties were 'more tolerant of heterogeneity' a stance reinforced by the local strength of women's trade unionism.⁶⁷

All of this meant that a whole cohort of younger political activists were cutting their teeth outside the formal politics of the council chamber. With roots in the women's and peace movements, community campaigns and the struggle for gay and lesbian rights, this 'missing generation', as Wainwright dubs them, found a vacuum they could easily fill when they decided in the 1970s that their campaigning activities required formal political expression if their objectives were to be achieved.

Thus the radical left was able to gain control of the City Council with relative ease, and without relying on the support of the major local bastions of the labour movement: the manufacturing unions. From Wainwright's arguments, it can already be seen that the political strategy is crucially dependent on the relationship between the institutions involved. These links (locales) provide the opportunities (resources) through which action is constituted.

The impact of local government restructuring: municipal socialism under pressure

The new urban left thus had relatively weak links with the private sector unions in manufacturing. For Wainwright this partly explains the difference in policy emphasis between Manchester and Sheffield, where the links were much stronger. In Sheffield, she suggests, the Labour Group's close relationship with the steel and engineering unions predisposed it to economic policy initiatives and particularly to measures to increase employment.⁶⁸ By contrast the emphases in Manchester were on equal opportunities and peace, reflecting the background of the new councillors, with economic policy being accorded a much lower priority.⁶⁹

⁶⁷*Ibid.* pp116.

⁶⁸Indeed in 1981 Sheffield Council was among the first local authorities in the country to establish a separate Employment Department. (Boddy M (1984) 'Local economic and employment strategies' in Boddy M and Fudge C (eds) *Local socialism?* (London: Macmillan Publishers) p166.)

⁶⁹Wainwright *op. cit.* pp121.

In 1980 Manchester was the first city in the world to declare itself a nuclear free zone.⁷⁰ The Council has adopted a comprehensive equal opportunities policy covering discrimination on the grounds of 'colour, creed, ethnic or national origin, disability, age (below 65), sex, marital status, sexuality, trade union activity or responsibility for dependants'.⁷¹ Beyond the specific area of employment the Council has provided financial and other support to women's organisations, anti-racist activities and gay and lesbian rights campaigns.⁷² In addition the Council has been particularly concerned to democratise its procedures and make elected representatives more accountable. For example Wainwright describes a number of initiatives towards the decentralisation of the control of council services.⁷³

Of course, the new urban left is not actively antagonistic towards trade unionism: far from it, and Susan Halford points out that in the context of the equal opportunities programme there is explicit attention given to involving the trade unions concerned in the development of policies.⁷⁴ There are two characteristics of the relationship between the Council and the unions which are significant and which again stem from the sets of institutional relationships I have been describing.

The first of these is that the radical left (as is often the case in large cities) has a particular affinity with public sector trade unionists. This is a group to which many of the activists belong and one which was growing rapidly during the period of development of the new urban left's politics.⁷⁵ In addition the development and maintenance of public service employment and public service provision is characteristically emphasised by the left, leading to a commonality of interest with

⁷⁰Manchester City Council (1987) *Manchester: a nuclear free city* (Manchester: Manchester City Council).

⁷¹Manchester City Council (undated) *Equal opportunity in employment - policy statement* (Manchester: Manchester City Council) p1.

⁷²Manchester City Council (1989) *A-Z information guide to council services* (Manchester: Manchester City Council)

⁷³Wainwright *op. cit.* pp124-5.

⁷⁴Personal communication, 14 August 1990.

⁷⁵The significance of these links has recently was recognised by the Thatcher Government which outlawed the practice of 'twin-tracking', in which individuals working for one local authority are members of the council in another.

the public service trade unions. The second is that where the radical left does seek a close relationship with the trade unions this is frequently on the basis of participation: of involving the unions in the decision-making process. This characteristic is particularly significant in the development of trade union responses in local government restructuring in Manchester, and I will return to it shortly.

One of the key characteristics of 'municipal socialism' has been a commitment to resisting attempts by central government to control local expenditure and impose cuts in budgets. In Manchester it was the old Labour Group's decision to introduce cuts which led to the breakaway of the radical left, and eventually to its gaining power in 1984. Ironically the introduction of the poll tax in 1990 has forced the left to introduce cuts of its own.⁷⁶ However for several years in the mid-1980s the aim was to maintain the level of council services despite continual pressure from the Conservative government to reduce expenditure. Such policies directly affect the Council's own workforce, and consequently the trade unions in local government. Negotiations between the Council's unions and members and officers are thus continually in progress as socialist councils have sought to minimise the impact of government policy on workers and residents alike. There are thus two sides to the relationship between the Council and the unions. The more political side referred to above and this industrial relations aspect. These tend to converge where unions are brought into the policy-making machinery of the Council not through their representation on the City Labour Party organisations, but as representatives of the Council's own employees. The development of responses to the provisions of the Local Government Act exemplifies this in particularly stark ways.

While the Government's legislation lays down stringent conditions regarding the tendering process,⁷⁷ local councils have a degree of autonomy in developing or

⁷⁶*Sunday Correspondent* (1990) 'Why Manchester must pay more for its past' 14 January.

⁷⁷See Appendix A.

restructuring their service provision to improve the chances of retaining the work in-house. Many councils who have a policy of trying to retain service production in the public sector have tried to ensure this by cutting budgets and staffing levels so that the in-house bid is lower than those from the private sector. However, as I outlined in Chapter Five, the trade unions reject this view, since it represents a major threat to the jobs and working conditions of their members. Instead they advocate a strategy of competing on quality rather than cost. The City Council has accepted this position too, at least in principle:

Manchester Council is determined to protect jobs and services from the effects of enforced tendering as far as possible. Part of the process is to review thoroughly existing services, improve the quality and expand services where possible.⁷⁸

However it sees this policy as having far-reaching implications:

This means changes in working practices, increased flexibility and a willingness to change and adapt to new circumstances. This can only be achieved through close and constructive working relationships between Council Members, unions and workers.⁷⁹

In practice this has involved the restructuring of those departments which are affected by CCT. As in many other authorities it has been decided to centralise service provision within new departments. Whereas in the past each department was responsible for its own cleaning, catering and so on, in future all civic catering will come under a new organisation, 'Manchester Fayre', while 'Manchester Operational Services' will have responsibility for vehicle maintenance, refuse collection, street cleaning and building cleaning.

The aim of these changes is to render the new organisations better able to win contracts than the private sector. In many cases there have also been substantial changes to the working practices and conditions of employment of the workforce. These sort of changes are the subject of negotiations between management and unions in the new organisations through the forums of 'service groups'. For the

⁷⁸Manchester City Council Enforced Tendering Team (1989) *Team profile* (Manchester: Manchester City Council) mimeo, p2.

⁷⁹*Ibid.* p2.

unions this largely involves responding to management proposals for change, negotiating an agreement and then balloting the members. For the Grounds Maintenance tender, for example, the management negotiated an agreement with the unions which would mean gardening staff working a 45-hour week during the summer, but only a 34-hour week in the winter in order to concentrate staff in the busy summer season. This was accepted by the workforce by a 2:1 majority.

These types of negotiations and agreements represent little more than the application of normal collective bargaining procedures to new Council proposals. What is different here is the greater willingness of the unions to compromise than has been the case in the past, in order to help the authority keep the work in the public sector. As a senior NUPE official in the union's North West Region put it:

we have had to be prepared to negotiate job losses, organisational changes, in some cases conditions of employment, and in some cases pay to actually beat the contractor.⁸⁰

Several unionists I spoke to said that they had no 'bottom line' below which they would not go in negotiations.

As I have already indicated, national union policy does not see this sort of approach as adequate. If local unions merely respond to initiatives from councils determined to push them through because of the threat of privatisation then the result is likely to be job losses and cuts in services. To try to prevent this, the national strategy argues in favour of a joint union/employer approach, so that the union point of view is taken into account in the formulation of Council policy, not merely as a response to a *fait accompli*. In Manchester a joint working arrangement has been established to ensure a trade union input during these earlier stages.

The strategy of joint working: participation or incorporation?

To implement the Council's policies on CCT and to coordinate the tendering

⁸⁰Interview with the author, 3 October 1989. In many cases a considerable degree of restructuring, particularly labour shedding, had already been undertaken before the negotiations on CCT proper began.

processes in different service departments, the Council established a permanent unit in the Town Hall under the Chief Executive. The team consists of a leader, policy workers, administrators and representatives from the four unions. The establishment of this unit was a Council initiative, as was the decision to involve the trade unions in this formal way. As I have already suggested the Council committed itself from the start to retaining services in-house and safeguarding jobs and services 'as far as possible'. In this respect Manchester differs significantly from Newcastle, which I consider below. In Newcastle most of the initiatives came from the trade union side. Although in Manchester the unions are part of the Council's policy formulation and implementation structure they are not the key initiators of policy.

The trade unionists I spoke to were happy to accept that the changes introduced in the way policy was formulated and in the way services were provided were Council, rather than trade union led. As one union organiser told me:

The City Council recognised that their existing structure was not geared for preparing the Council for competitive tendering. So they've set up a special unit called the Enforced Tendering Team under the Chief Executive's Department. [...] They recognised also that the involvement of the trade unions was vital, not part way through, not at the end, but right at the very beginning.⁸¹

The unions in Newcastle said that it had been a struggle to persuade the Council to involve the unions. In Manchester there was some initial negotiation regarding the status of the union representatives, and the Council did agree that they would be ultimately responsible to their unions, rather than the team. However in practice shop stewards had found that the trade union representatives' loyalty to the Council had on occasion been a barrier to completely frank discussions within the unions. A branch officer I spoke to told me that at times the union representatives had not divulged information on the tendering process because of the confidentiality to the Council. The representatives denied conflicts of interest however:

⁸¹Interview with the author, 4 October 1989.

I am responsible to my Branch. I am also responsible to the team leader for my work programme. ... There are some things which are confidential, but if it affected the jobs and conditions of the members, then I would have to let it out. But if it affects the confidentiality of the letting of the contract if it is a purely commercial matter, then clearly I have got a duty to the team to keep it quiet. I have not found a conflict of interest yet.⁸²

There are differences here between the unions, however, and there is also evidence that the unions' own policies are not always wholeheartedly endorsed by their members, especially where individuals have 'done well' out of the reorganisation of service provision. One NALGO activist who is employed as a manager in one of the new direct service organisations saw no conflict at all on the grounds that the interests of the unions and those of the Council were identical:

Q: What is your view of enforced tendering?

A: It could be seen as blessing and I welcome the challenge, although I don't like the way it has been applied by the present government. Competition is a good thing since it involves running council departments more like the private sector.

Q: And is that positive assessment the same regardless of whether you are wearing a management hat or a trade union one?

A: Yes, from all points of view: NALGO, manager, rate payer, employee. I see it as an opportunity.⁸³

This is not to say that trade unionists act purely out of self-interest, but it shows how the context in which an individual is located can influence their views, by providing the 'resources' for making sense of their situation. On the outcome of some recent negotiations one NUPE activist was much more disillusioned:

I think our biggest stumbling block has been the Council. OK, they are supposed to be socialist, but you might as well have been talking to Tories. Dreadful. They wouldn't give an inch. For these low paid workers a fiver is a lot of money. They don't realise that people are struggling [...] I think it is going back in time.⁸⁴

The representatives on the Enforced Tendering Team recognised that they were potentially in a difficult position, but took the view that at least in principle they had the ear of the Council's officers, even if practical consultation procedures sometimes left something to be desired. This is one way in which aspects of the setting for action (in this case proximity and access to Council officers) are

⁸²Interview with the author, 5 October 1989.

⁸³Interview with the author, 11 October 1989.

⁸⁴Interview with the author, 12 October 1989.

mobilised as part of the action taken by trade unions.

While the representatives on the enforced tendering team have a direct input into the development and implementation of the Council's CCT strategy, the same cannot be said of the grass roots activists and lay members. By contrast with the situation in Newcastle (see below) the distance (metaphorically and literally) between the Council decision makers and the shop stewards and branch secretaries has meant that there is only very limited grass roots involvement.

As far as I could tell the only involvement of lay members was in briefing sessions either at union meetings or in the form of workforce briefings organised by the Enforced Tendering Team. The latter would be addressed jointly by management as well as unions, which presumably makes it difficult for differences in the positions of the two to be aired.

The lay activists I talked to claimed that there was very little communication between the Enforced Tendering Team in the Town Hall and the grass roots of the unions, and there was certainly only the most limited involvement of shop stewards in the drawing up of service profiles and specifications, in contrast to the situation in Newcastle. This may improve with the development by the union representatives on the Team of trade union newsletters separate from that produced for the workforce by the Team as a whole. However the unions have been unable to produce a joint union newsletter, which epitomises an important characteristic of the union response in Manchester: its disunity.

This particularly affects the relationship between NUPE and the GMB, since the TGWU's membership is fairly small. Those I spoke to all candidly admitted that NUPE and the GMB were engaged in an open recruitment war. The history of this dispute long predates the implementation of CCT and is connected to the internal power struggles of the City Labour Party and the ruling Labour Group. However some argue that the implementation of CCT has heightened these tensions somewhat. An influential member of the GMB admitted that his union was using

CCT as a means of recruiting new members (many of whom have in the past been members of NUPE). Meanwhile NUPE takes the view that if its members' jobs are privatised or transferred to another department it will follow them, even if they have moved to an area traditionally organised by another union. According to a senior NUPE full-time official in the region:

Our policy is that if our members go down the road into the private sector, we follow them, simple as that. And of course we have done, and that has brought us into conflict with the general unions.⁸⁵

The view of one of the GMB's regional organisers was similar:

On the face of it it seems reasonable. When you really get down to the nitty gritty it is very difficult. It differs from authority to authority. There are good officers in all unions and they all strive to protect their own membership, without aggravating our relationship. But in some areas, one union in particular is hell-bent on securing its membership at all costs. I'll name it: it's NUPE.⁸⁶

The result of this conflict is a failure of the unions in the region and in the City to work together as closely as elsewhere, or in some cases to work together at all.

It is impossible to tell whether inter-union conflicts would have been mitigated if the Council had given less of lead in the development of CCT strategy, possibly forcing the unions to bury their differences and generate a common response. However, it is clear that the system of joint working between management and workers has important implications for the nature of the trade union response. Put most starkly the evidence from Manchester suggests that joint working carries two dangers. Firstly, that the union hierarchies become incorporated into the formal processes of decision-making in the Council and thereby risk losing the independence which some see as a vital guarantee that unions prioritise the interests of their members over those of the employer. Secondly, that key union actors become separated organisationally from their lay

⁸⁵Interview with the author, 3 October 1989.

⁸⁶Interview with the author, 3 October 1989.

members and grass roots activists so that those members and activists do not participate so fully in the processes of policy formation and implementation than they otherwise would.

The risk of incorporation is one that in principle the unions take seriously. In practice, however, there are so few opportunities for trade unions explicitly to influence public policy that when they are offered positions such as those held by the secondees to the Enforced Tendering Team in Manchester they tend to welcome them. The problem with this, according to some activists, is that even a radical Labour council may at times be forced into a position of implementing changes detrimental to the interests of trade unionists. Whilst in theory the trade unions have reserved the right to oppose such developments, and insist that their representatives are accountable to the unions, in practice such sanctions are something of a last resort. In day to day situations it is difficult to see how unionists could pursue an independent line if they are part of formal council structures without those structures breaking down.

In Newcastle, by contrast, as I shall show below, trade union activists rejected the idea of joint working from the beginning and explicitly recognise the dangers of incorporation. Much of the development of trade unionism in response to CCT in Newcastle has been predicated on the need to maintain very close links with grass roots shop stewards and lay members and where possible to involve them in the practical process of implementation. In addition, lack of strong formal organisational links with the Council in Newcastle has allowed the unions to develop policy jointly with user groups in a way which has not happened to any great extent in Manchester. There the links with users where they exist have been made through the Enforced Tendering Team, rather than by the unions independently. When I asked whether unions had made moves to involve service users one official of the GMB said:

As far as the privatisation structure around the local authorities is concerned the only two people that need to be involved is the management and the employees. No one else needs to be involved, no one knows the job better than those guys. So we have not involved

anybody outside the actual people who's doing the work.⁸⁷

An important contrast between the two cases, as my discussion of the Newcastle situation will show, is the lack of any sense of transformation in the practices of public service trade unionism in Manchester. The situation in Newcastle has been exploited by the unions as a means to bring about a renewal of grass roots trade unionism while in Manchester I found the dominant ethos among trade union officers to be 'business as usual'.

Spaces for labour: old and new

The network of locales in which trade unionism in local government in Manchester is located is crucial to understanding why it has responded in the way it has. I described this idea of a network as being made up of the relationships between the institutions through which trade union strategy and tactics are mediated. In line with the comparative method I have adopted, the significance of the Manchester case will only become fully apparent in the light of the other cases.

An important link is that between the various unions. In Manchester the battle for membership means that inter-union relations are marked by a degree of suspicion, if not outright hostility. This has made joint initiatives such as newsletters very difficult to develop.

The relationship between the City Council and the local government unions is of paramount importance. The initiative to involve the unions came originally from the council placing the unions immediately in a subordinate position. Cooperation offered by the Council, was, in Giddensian language, an aspect of the setting of action used by the unions in developing action. Along with the offer of joint working came involvement in the development of policy and more mundanely an offer of office accommodation.

This latter is significant because in contrast to the situation in Newcastle

⁸⁷Interview with the author, 3 October 1989.

which will be discussed below, the trade union representatives on the Council's Enforced Tendering team work in the teams' own open plan offices. In this sense they develop their action in what Giddens describes as a 'front region' of the locale, under the eye of the Council.⁸⁸ Most of the time this may cause no problems, or have positive benefits. For example it also ensures that the Council is to some extent under the eye of the unions. However, in the event of any conflict of interest between the Council and its workers, the effect is to separate the trade union secondees from their members, and deprive them of a readily available private space ('back region') in which to discuss their tactics. The lack of contact between the secondees and the membership was a recurrent theme in my interviews with shop stewards, who by contrast with Newcastle, have not been involved very much in the development of trade union actions, to the extent, in some cases, of feeling actively excluded.

If the office arrangements are a form of physical locale, with significant social consequences, the policy of joint working is the political relationship which they symbolise. In joint working the trade unions are not independent of the Council's policy-making process, but a part of it, with the result that their ideas and expertise are fed directly into the Council's strategy. There are enormous benefits to this for the unions, and it compares extremely well with the treatment of the unions in many local authorities. The danger that it carries arises again when the interests of the council and those of the workforce diverge. In this situation, without an independent strategy, the unions may find their priorities determined more by the needs of the employers than the membership.

What structuration theory suggests, however, is that actors use their knowledge of their own circumstances to take advantage of the opportunities presented in their locales of operation. In the case of Manchester, it may be that the strategy of joint working was the best available to the unions in the light of their

⁸⁸Giddens (1984) *op. cit.* pp122-6.

knowledge of the likely consequences of rejecting it. With a political tradition involving historically weak links between the labour movement and the local authority in the City, the offer of cooperation from a radical left Council was too good a gift horse to look in the mouth.

In this sense the strength of the engineering and textile unions in the city, which saw a particular space for labour being developed 'in the lions' den' of nineteenth and earlier twentieth century competitive capitalism, may be giving way to a new sort of space, in which the public sector can be protected from wholesale takeover by the private, but on the basis of a degree of re-incorporation of labour into the decision-making processes of the local state.

Newcastle-upon-Tyne City Council

Newcastle-upon-Tyne City Council is one of five local authorities making up the former Metropolitan County of Tyne and Wear. The others are North and South Tyneside (at the mouth of the River Tyne), Gateshead, which faces Newcastle across the river and Sunderland on the River Wear.

The city of Newcastle

If Manchester was founded on cotton, Tyneside is synonymous with ship-building and coal-mining. The North-East region as a whole produced over a quarter of the global output of ships in the first decade of the twentieth century, but by 1974 this proportion had fallen to just 0.37%.⁸⁹ Employment in shipbuilding and ship repair declined rapidly during the 1970s and 1980s. In 1971 22,000 Tynesiders were employed in the industry. This figure had fallen to 16,000 by 1984 and to just 4,000 in 1987.⁹⁰

The coal industry, which provided the original impetus for the development

⁸⁹Hudson R (1986) 'Producing an industrial wasteland: capital, labour and the state in North-East England' in Martin R and Rowthorn B (eds) *The geography of de-industrialisation* (Basingstoke: Macmillan) p171.

⁹⁰Robinson F (1988) 'Industrial structure' in Robinson F (ed) *Post-industrial Tyneside* (Newcastle: Newcastle-upon-Tyne City Libraries and Arts) pp18 and 25.

of ship-building, was the oldest in the country 'and, consequently, was one of the first to be exhausted'.⁹¹ By the early 1980s little remained of the mining industry on Tyneside. Heavy engineering, another Tyneside staple, also suffered badly in the recession, but nonetheless provided 29,000 jobs in Tyneside in 1984.⁹² The area's status as a 'problem region' dates back to the recession of the 1930s, of which the most enduring symbol is probably the Jarrow Crusade. Unemployment in Jarrow on the south bank of the Tyne reached 80% following the closure of Palmer's shipyard.⁹³ High levels of unemployment relative to other regions are also a significant feature of the area. In 1986 21% of the total workforce in Newcastle City was unemployed.

The coal, shipbuilding and heavy engineering industries were dominated by jobs for men rather than women, and this is reflected in the low proportion of women who were in paid employment compared with the national average. Until the early 1950s the North region consistently had one of the lowest economic activity rates for women.⁹⁴ The regional rates have converged in recent years, but the legacy of the past remains, most notably in the male-dominated traditions of the labour movement in the North-East. Moreover:

The labour market remains strongly segmented by gender. The industrial and occupational structures of male and female employment differ considerably. Women are clustered in jobs generally characterised by low pay, low skill levels and low status, often with poorer conditions and fewer prospects for promotion [and, we may add, lower levels of unionisation - JP]. Moreover, a large proportion of women work in part-time jobs, which usually means lower rates of pay and poorer conditions than in comparable full-time jobs.⁹⁵

Many 'women's jobs' are found in the service industries, and like Manchester, Newcastle has long had a thriving commercial sector supported initially by the coal industry and then developing into a regional service centre more

⁹¹*Ibid.* p12.

⁹²*Ibid.* p29.

⁹³Dunford and Perrons *op. cit.* p322.

⁹⁴Marshall *op. cit.* pp128.

⁹⁵Robinson F (1988) 'The labour market' in Robinson F (ed) *Post-industrial Tyneside* (Newcastle: Newcastle-upon-Tyne City Libraries and Arts) p65.

generally. Although the recession of the early 1980s saw employment contract in Tyneside's main private sector employer (retail distribution), some private sector services did grow throughout the period, most notably financial and other professional services. In Newcastle itself it is the public services which are of overwhelming importance, however, with 40% of *all* jobs. This relative importance of the public sector is if anything even more a consequence of the collapse of traditional manufacturing industries than is the case in Manchester.

During the post-War period, then, Newcastle became another 'public sector city' (in 1981 46% of households lived in local authority housing) and another of the 'spaces for labour'. But it was a space secured on the basis of a very different labour movement history and, as a result, a very different labour movement politics.

The formal politics of the labour movement in Newcastle, centred on the City Council, is dominated by the right-wing paternalism of the local union bosses and senior councillors. Outside the formal political structures, however, there are traditions of radicalism, which while less secure, do provide some resources with which alternative strategies might be developed.

The first of these is the shop stewards movement of the 1970s, which while most immediately concerned with issues 'at the point of production' did feed into a wider radical socialist movement, as David Byrne describes:

Industrial politics [...] on Tyneside was syndicalist, organized around shop-stewards in engineering and the shipyards with lodge officials and the activists of the Seaman's Reform Movement playing a similar role in mining and shipping. [...] It was this tradition, frequently 'unofficial', which maintained Tyneside industrial militancy in a range of important disputes in the 1960s and 1970s, including the 1966 seamen's strike, and the 1972 and 1974 miners' strikes. Although the main basis of action was immediate issues, the leading militants were frequently part of the wider socialist movement in the area and many were associated, however loosely, with the ideas of the Institute for Workers Control. The Communist Party never had much influence on Tyneside other than among seamen. The leading 'rank-and-file' activists of the 1960s and 1970s generally regarded themselves as anti-Stalinist leftists. This was in no small part a remnant of ILP influence from the 1930s and 1940s. [...] This tradition has by no means wholly disappeared, although the power of the shop-stewards movement is now massively reduced [...]. It survives in some large-scale engineering plants and in the pits and *has also been taken up in public sector employment in the National Civil Service [...], the Health Service and Local*

The shop stewards' movement, of course, was of national significance during the 1970s, and, as I mentioned in Chapter Two, was occasionally the source of prefigurative activity in which 'workers' plans' were developed to demonstrate how industry could be run for the benefit of the workforce and society in general. The Vickers' Shop Stewards' Combine Committee was at the cutting edge of these initiatives and, while it was a national organisation, one of its main bases was in Newcastle where Vickers had its principal plants.⁹⁷ This grassroots approach engendered a radicalism which operated outside the paternalist labourism of the City Council.

The local left was sufficiently strong during this period to support a radical bookshop, Days of Hope, which was a focus for socialists outside manufacturing industry as well. Indeed community action was another source of strength particularly for workers in the Community Development Project (CDP), which had two of its eleven sites on Tyneside.⁹⁸ One was in Benwell in Newcastle, West of the City Centre, not far from the Vickers plant at Scotswood and originally built to house workers from the plant.⁹⁹ The other was at Percy and Trinity, two communities in North Shields.

The CDP was established in 1969 by the Home Office at the end of the Wilson administration with a view to tackling poverty through providing communities with the resources and expertise to undertake their own development. Joan Higgins and her co-workers have documented the process of radicalisation which the activists in the CDP underwent during the early 1970s as it became clear that the problems they were trying to tackle were caused by wider

⁹⁶Byrne D (1989) *Beyond the inner city* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press) p77, emphasis added.

⁹⁷Beynon H and Wainwright H (1979) *The workers' report on Vickers* (London: Pluto Press).

⁹⁸Higgins J, Deakin N, Edwards J and Wicks M (1983) *Government and urban poverty: inside the policy making process* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell) p13.

⁹⁹Robinson F (1988) 'Introduction' in Robinson F (ed) *Post-industrial Tyneside* (Newcastle: Newcastle-upon-Tyne City Libraries and Arts) p6.

processes of economic restructuring.¹⁰⁰ The reports produced by the CDP were critical of government policy and eventually the Project was wound up. Its legacy, however, was to contribute to the emergence of what John Gyford labels the 'new urban left'.¹⁰¹ Furthermore, Gyford identifies the Tyneside projects as particularly significant in the process of radicalisation.¹⁰²

The impact of local government restructuring: boss politics in a cold climate

Whereas in Manchester the new urban left had taken the route of formal political involvement through the council chamber, in Newcastle the strength of the old-fashioned paternalism, dominated by the GMB, meant that community activists and radical shop stewards were denied the opportunities of engaging in local electoral politics to the same extent. I take this to be a crucial difference in the pattern of labour movement politics in Manchester and Newcastle and one which was in part responsible for the different strategies adopted the unions towards the restructuring of local government: joint working in Manchester and independent campaigning in Newcastle.

As I suggested above, in Manchester, prior to the growth of the radical left, the local Labour Party branches were worthy, if lacklustre organisations, barely supporting an 'old guard' of moderate councillors. This weakness stemmed, according to Wainwright, from the lack of an organisational base in the unions. In Newcastle, the local Party branches were (and to some extent still are) if anything in a worse state.¹⁰³ Here, however, the problem is not the lack of a union involvement, but rather a surfeit of union involvement of a particular type.

The largest trade union in the area is the GMB and it dominates Labour Party politics in Newcastle. For many on the left in the labour movement, Newcastle conjures up an image of paternalistic, undemocratic, machine politics, run by an

¹⁰⁰Higgins *et al.*, *op. cit.* pp29-41.

¹⁰¹Gyford J (1985) *The politics of local socialism* (London: Allen and Unwin) p18.

¹⁰²*Ibid.* p34.

¹⁰³Wainwright *op. cit.* p139.

elite of trade union barons and Labour Party bosses, and little changed since the scandals of the early seventies when T Dan Smith, the leader of the City Council was imprisoned for corruption. Wainwright, writing of the present leader, Jeremy Beecham, documents the system of patronage that is used for buying off opposition.¹⁰⁴ In their survey of Tyneside politics Peter Hetherington and Fred Robinson explain it like this:

Tynesiders generally accept their lot in an area dominated by a conservative political machine, which happens to be Labour and is funded largely by two powerful unions which tend to pull the strings. Tyneside — like the wider North East — is one of Labour's traditional bastions but has never been noted for its political radicalism. The party sits securely on generally large majorities. All four Tyneside Councils are Labour-controlled and all the parliamentary constituencies, with the exception of Tynemouth, are held by Labour MPs. This strength has bred complacency, over-dependence on a union machine — notably the [...] GMB — and weakness where the party should be strong: at the grass roots.¹⁰⁵

This centrality of the regional trade union hierarchies to policy-making in the area amounts to a corporatism which has survived the elimination of such structures at national level. A prominent labour movement activist in the city claims that this is a phenomenon which is strengthening:

all of the efforts that have taken place over the last ten years [...] to destroy consensual politics and to take apart that post-war tri-partism between the public sector the private sector and the trade union movement, might have succeeded to some extent at national level [...] but it hasn't succeeded at regional level in the north. [...] Quite the reverse. Thus what you have is a process of continuing involvement, in fact probably increased participation, in 'the running of the region'.¹⁰⁶

The scope that this situation gives for an oppositional politics based on a radical transformation of the traditional practices of trade unionism in the area might appear to be limited. However, as I shall suggest, there are strong signs that in local government services such a shift may be, if not fully underway, at least getting up steam.

As Wainwright points out, Newcastle under Beecham's labourism was a

¹⁰⁴*Ibid.* pp136-7.

¹⁰⁵Hetherington P and Robinson F (1988) 'Tyneside life' in Robinson F (ed) *Post-industrial Tyneside* (Newcastle: Newcastle-upon-Tyne City Libraries and Arts) p204.

¹⁰⁶Interview with the author, 20 July 1989.

high-spending local authority, and much of that was popular and benefitted working class areas.¹⁰⁷ When financial restrictions began to bite, they did so gradually. While no-one on the City Council would claim that local government has not been under attack from the centre, there have been no attempts to engage in the oppositional strategies adopted in Sheffield, Manchester, Brent, Lambeth and most notably Liverpool.¹⁰⁸ According to one senior councillor to whom I spoke, although the Labour Group does not like the new legislation it accepts it and abides by the law.¹⁰⁹ By the late 1980s, therefore, Newcastle City Council had seen a steady, but gradual decline in its capacity to act locally, but had not engaged in developing radical strategies in response: a steady as she goes mentality prevailed.

The effect of this incremental impoverishment was to produce a Council which, by 1988, was a poorer and weaker authority, but one which had undergone little major restructuring. Many of the radical developments in local government, whether rightward (as in Wandsworth) or leftward (as in Manchester) had passed Newcastle by.

The *Local Government Act* 1988, therefore, seems to have been one of the first occasions on which the Council has been forced into significant *qualitative* change in the way it operates its services. According to trade unionists, at least, this challenge too found the Authority without a radical response, and this provided the opportunity for the development of a union-led response, as one local activist told me:

What we have learned from the start is that within this authority there was a massive vacuum. People did not have ideas on what to do. We had ideas and we never waited. We decided from the start that it was not a matter of responding to what management were proposing, we would actually take the initiative and fill the vacuum.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷Wainwright *op. cit.* p137.

¹⁰⁸For example, on Tyneside the Labour Party accepted seats on the board of the Tyne and Wear Urban Development Corporation: a centrally-imposed, unelected and private-sector dominated vehicle for urban redevelopment along Thatcherite lines.

¹⁰⁹Interview with the author, 15 September 1989.

¹¹⁰Interview with the author, 18 July 1989.

The result of this is that the impact of Compulsory Competitive Tendering on local government in Newcastle cannot be understood independently from the strategies of the unions.

The campaign against compulsory tendering: towards transformation

Much of the trade union work in Newcastle in developing the response to the introduction of CCT has been based around the Corporate Joint Trade Union Group. This forum brings together all the unions with members working for the authority. Once plans for legislation for CCT were announced, but before the publication of *Who Cares Wins*, the group agreed a joint union strategy similar to that developed by SCAT. They then approached the City Council for their response. According to one leading activist, the Council initially took the view that the way to compete against private contractors was to cut wages, conditions and jobs, and made little reference to the role of trade unions. The unions challenged this:

we did a lot of lobbying and talking to councillors. We organised seminars when we brought up speakers ... and we invited all the Labour councillors and the Chief Officers, to hear how we should be responding. [...] At the same time there were a couple of officers who had a lot of sympathy with the way we were going [...] working with them we eventually got a strategy adopted by the authority which was based on the trade union approach. In broad terms that actually became the regional strategy.¹¹¹

The 'regional strategy' referred to was produced by the North Eastern Regional Joint Trade Union Group to provide a guide to action throughout the North East of England.¹¹² The next step was to get the authority to provide facility time and allow the trade unions an input into the process:

we then got an agreement [...] about the trade union input and an approach that directly involved the trade unions, and for this authority — people couldn't believe it had been done compared to what had gone on in the past — we got an agreement that we would have full-time release for two stewards in each of the key services.¹¹³

¹¹¹Interview with the author, 18 July 1989.

¹¹²North Eastern Regional Joint Trade Union Group (1988) *Trade union strategy to combat statutory tendering* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: NUPE, NALGO and GMB).

¹¹³Interview with the author, 18 July 1989.

This agreement on the allocation of resources to the trade unions to develop independent structures has been crucial to the development of the unions' response to CCT in the city. It has meant that the joint union structure has been able to generate initiatives and proposals, which have then been adopted by the Council. Through this the unions see themselves as gaining political credibility, which ensures they are listened to in the future, while remaining independent of the Council's policy-making machinery.

This led to the formation of the Joint Trade Union Group's anti-privatisation working group. This consists of a convenor and deputy convenor (who are senior shop stewards) for each of the services affected by CCT. There is an agreement between the two main manual workers' unions (GMB and NUPE¹¹⁴) that in each case the convenor will be from one union and their deputy from the other. There is an explicit policy that the convenors in services with largely female workforces (particularly building cleaning and catering) should be women. This has not been so in the past. For example, school caretakers (usually male) are part of the cleaning workforce which is otherwise overwhelmingly female. However, it is normally the caretakers, who have full-time jobs, who become shop stewards and convenors. Until very recently the part-time cleaners have not held positions in the union. A similar situation has existed in catering. Now the convenor for catering services is a woman, and there are moves to ensure that the two convenors for cleaning are women as well. The catering convenor told me that she worked very well with her (male) deputy and:

if any one has problems either can answer them. But I often get more wanting to speak to me, because I think they can relate more to a woman. [...] Up until two years ago I was the only woman steward on school meals and catering - we had postal stewards - but we didn't have anyone who was active.¹¹⁵

By contrast by 1989 all the members of the catering joint shop stewards'

¹¹⁴Each represents about half the manual workers in the authority.

¹¹⁵Interview with the author, 18 July 1989.

committee were women, with the exception of the deputy convenor, and in time he would return to his job, and be replaced by a woman from the committee. (The Joint Shop Stewards' Committee system was still being built up in the authority. Each committee consists of a number of stewards from both unions in a particular service and according to one senior convenor, it is increasingly these committees which are taking decisions about union strategy in the authority.)

Once the unions had gained adequate resources to develop policies towards CCT, they were able to work in detail on the tendering process itself. In the authority the first service to go through all the stages I have described above was school and welfare catering. According to the convenors, all the initiatives on improving service delivery and developing the specification came from the unions. In the spring of 1988, fifteen months before the catering contract was due to start, the unions decided that it was important that the authority should have a food policy. The joint union group organised a seminar with the London Food Commission, which brought together a range of interested groups including parents, teachers, school governors, trade unionists and community groups and drew up a policy which the authority was then persuaded to adopt.

The unions' second demand was that areas of the catering service then contracted-out be brought in-house. For example, in the past the Civic Centre Banqueting Suite had used private caterers. The unions requested that when the contract expired in April 1989 the service should be provided in future by a council workforce on union-agreed pay rates. In spite of scepticism from councillors and officers that the Council could run such a service, this demand was achieved. The unions were also concerned about the poor up-take of meals in schools, and asked that a marketing campaign be organised to improve this. One member of the school kitchen staff claimed that as a result of improving the decor in school canteens both the take-up rate and the children's behaviour have improved. The trade unions have also been closely involved in the establishment of school 'catering

committees', bringing kitchen staff, parents and teachers together to take decisions on the organisation of the service. Thus Newcastle has seen the considerable involvement of service users in the response to CCT in line with the ideas expressed in the SCAT strategy.

When the draft specification had been produced by the authority, the unions organised a day seminar attended by shop stewards and members of the catering committees. A detailed analysis of the specification was drawn up, and according to union activists, most of the amendments suggested by the seminar were accepted by the authority. A key amendment was that the catering committees should be consulted before any changes to the service are introduced. The final demand was that when the management had drawn up the DSO bid, the unions should be told the labour element of the bid and given the chance to fight it if it was unacceptable. In the event, the labour element was acceptable. Only one firm expressed any interest in bidding for the contract, but did not do so. The contract was awarded to the catering division of the new DSO, known as 'City Works'. As the process of competitive tendering takes its course the unions are aiming to follow a similar policy in the other services over the five year phasing-in period.

I argued above that the unions in Manchester had found it difficult to develop a response to the threat of privatisation independently from that of the local authority. The strategy of joint working, which can be justified by reference to national labour movement strategy, carries the risk that unions will be incorporated. In Newcastle they have been more able to maintain their independence and hence their radicalism, and this has been one of the hallmarks of the local response. Local authority unions in Newcastle have used the challenge of CCT to undertake a transformation of their traditional forms of organisation and political practices. I shall indicate below how this transformation is related to the setting or locale in which it has occurred. Before doing so I will briefly outline the main characteristics of the changes: in gender relations, community links and inter-union

relations.

The historical marginalisation of women in the local authority unions in the City was part of a wider pattern in the area, which derives from the growth of the labour movement in the region around male-dominated heavy industries such as ship-building. This situation contrasts markedly with the north west of England, for example, where the female-employing textile sector produced a different sort of labour movement. The threat from competitive tendering led the unions to realise that involving part-time women workers in union activity was a priority if the strategy was to be successful. A deliberate policy was adopted of bringing women into positions of power at the grass-roots level so that the response in services like catering with largely female workforces could be influenced by the women involved. One full-time union organiser told me that he had spent much of the last six months recruiting and training fifty new women shop stewards in cleaning and catering. One of those stewards suggested that for all the problems caused by CCT it had at least made the unions 'take some notice of the women for the first time'.

The need to involve the users of local government services is part of the national policy of the union movement in responding to CCT. In Newcastle, however it is something which cuts across the grain of a traditionally inward-looking labour movement. A local campaigner contrasted the way the unions would once have responded to an event like the proposed closure of a shipyard with what was required today:

The traditional response is usually to get a march together and get on the train to London. But to the credit of all involved on the trade union side, they sat down and thought 'what can we do to save these yards.' [...] And the answer is that it isn't just a trade union and labour movement campaign. [...] The campaign involved churches, the business community, [...] community organisations [...] and all political parties.¹¹⁶

A similar transformation in local authority trade unionism has been required in fighting CCT. This is clearly seen in many of the initiatives in the catering

¹¹⁶Interview with the author, 20 July 1989.

service, particularly the involvement of parents and teachers in the drawing up of the specification and in the monitoring of work through the catering committees. These initiatives may have important implications for the way trade unions respond to changing social structures more generally. If the economy is becoming more dominated by service industries, then the characteristics of those industries should play a significant role in the development of trade unionism in the future. In particular traditional forms of industrial action have a more immediate and visible impact on consumers in the service sector than in manufacturing. For them to be successful, it may be important to gain the active support and involvement of service users in a way which is not the case in other sectors.

Finally, the relationships between the trade unions in the authority have traditionally been at least competitive, if not actually hostile. This was particularly true of the relationship between the two main manual workers' unions, NUPE and GMB. Writing of the GMB, Wainwright draws the distinction thus:

Their main rival is NUPE, which in the north-east has come up from behind. Its northern region bears all the signs of a union which has had to struggle for its position. It is one of NUPE's most radical campaigning divisions. And one of the reasons for this is that it had to organise the unorganised and the difficult-to-organise, while the GMB had long ago sown up [*sic*] the main municipal workforces.¹¹⁷

According to those at the top of the regional union hierarchies, strained relationships are largely the product of personality clashes at the grass-roots. By contrast, grass-roots activists made the point that as far as ordinary members and shop stewards are concerned it makes little difference which union they belong to and are happy to be represented by stewards and convenors from either. In their view it is the organisational ambitions of the senior full-time officers, and the competition for members that that engenders, which are the sources of conflict. What is not disputed, however, is that inter-union cooperation, rather than competition, is required if the response to CCT is to succeed. The Joint Union

¹¹⁷Wainwright *op. cit.* p141.

Groups at both regional and authority level are symptomatic of a new cooperation between the unions involved, as are the Joint Shop Stewards Committees. It is clear that a united response has been of prime importance in ensuring that management took union demands seriously.

Making the links

If traditional paternalist trade unionism *does* give way to more participatory structures in local government in Newcastle, it will be because of the way in which local action has drawn on its institutional settings. The independence of, but close links to the City Council is neatly symbolised by the office arrangements which contrast with those in Manchester. In Newcastle the trade union anti-privatisation campaign has office space in the Civic Centre, but they are offices of its own and not shared with Council Officers. Within the locale which is the setting for interaction between the unions and the council, the unions' offices are a 'back region' where policy can be developed 'out of sight' of the council. Shop stewards use the offices regularly, meeting there socially between shifts, developing campaign strategies, and holding discussions in the Joint Shop Stewards' Committees. These arrangements express the unions' independence of the council, and this has been a stance developed in explicit contrast with the joint working arrangements of Sheffield and Manchester. As in Manchester, however, policy arose because the unions took advantage of the opportunities presented by their setting, in this case an offer of facility time and a 'policy vacuum' in the Council.

The local traditions of radical trade unionism were also important and the leading convenor drew explicit links between the unions' strategy against CCT and the shop stewards movement which had been so prominent on Tyneside. Other institutional locales were also of crucial importance. The relationship with capital was influential: the absence of any strong interest from private companies was a product of their perception of Newcastle as a labour movement stronghold where a long struggle would be required to 'regain the space'. This is one example of a

'non-local locale'. Another is provided by the knowledge of the SCAT strategy developed originally in London, but providing the basis of the response in Newcastle.

The development of links with users was crucial. The catering committees are a case in point: the close links between the school catering staff, children and to a lesser extent parents could be developed into a means of building up the committees, but this required the women working in the kitchens to be brought into positions of power in the local union structures. This may be seen as another example of the unions capitalising on aspects of their setting to develop a response.

Good relationships between the unions, especially at the grassroots, were also of key importance and again these were mobilised as a resource in developing action. The locale in this case was given formal expression in the joint union groups which met at various levels in the unions' hierarchy.

In Newcastle, then, the unions fighting CCT are at the centre of a particularly dense network of institutional links or locales. This, together with the underlying strength of trade unionism in local government on Tyneside has enabled them to preserve the spaces of labour in that region, but on the basis of considerable transformation of the existing practices of union organisation. In the other two case studies in Wandsworth and Milton Keynes the settings of action were also significant, but in very different ways.

Coping with marginalisation: Wandsworth and Milton Keynes

London Borough of Wandsworth

The story of trade union responses to the restructuring of local government in Wandsworth has been detailed in Chapter Four, and I don't intend to rehearse the narrative here. Instead the time has come to reconsider the actions of the trade unions in Wandsworth in the light of my discussion of the concept of 'locale'.

The front line: a lost space reclaimed?

In Manchester and Newcastle the first round of the battle by capital to reclaim its lost spaces was won convincingly by labour, albeit on rather different bases. In Wandsworth it was decisively lost. Coming some six years earlier, Wandsworth was in some senses the front line of the struggle.

During the refuse collection dispute institutional settings strongly influenced the trade unions' actions. The weak links with the local Labour Party were particularly disabling especially in the run up to the local elections, and these were compounded by the lack of any institutional connections with users or user groups.

The existing practices of trade unionism in the Borough were dominated by the defensive militancy which had been so successful in the 1970s, and it was these resources which the manual unions were thrown back onto. The strong support from NALGO demonstrates the significance of financial resources which enabled NALGO to pay its members throughout the period of industrial action.

The local political context was such that the radical right Council was seen as merely a flash in the pan, while the local economic context was used by the unions to emphasise the threat of increased unemployment implied by contracting out. The first of these was unfortunately mistaken, although Wandsworth did not become a safe Conservative Council until 1990. The second of these was the only propaganda focus of the campaign, and meant that the Conservative critique of inadequate public services was not addressed.

In subsequent disputes, such as that over the proposed privatisation of housing management, the institutional locales were rather different, reflecting the beginning of attempts to transform traditional practices. The relationship forged with tenants' groups was of crucial significance and the joint campaign was successful. This commitment to working with users came as a result of a reappraisal of the tactics adopted in the previous disputes.

Non-local locales were important too. In the first dispute the lack of a

national union campaign, despite the 'flagship' nature of the changes, was identified by the unions as a key failing. There were also few good links to workers elsewhere in London. By contrast the Council was strongly supported by national government and was developing links with the private sector.

The relationship with the Council was eventually the key to the failure of the campaigns. In the face of overwhelming commitment to private provision the unions' apparently secure network of labour movement resources proved to be somewhat threadbare. This begs the question, of course, of how a working-class area dominated by Labour politics for most the 1970s could become a bastion of municipal Thatcherism in the 1980s. Just as trade unions have their locales of operation, so too do local councils and among the most important of these is the demographic composition of the area. The locales which enable or constrain the development of union responses are themselves therefore the product of other interrelations. In Wandsworth the image of the area as an enclave of new right politics, with low local taxes but limited social services has reinforced a demographic shift which was already underway. Today a particular type of person is moving into the Borough ensuring that the former Labour area is safely in Conservative hands.

The gentrification of the inner-London suburbs has had political as well as social effects. Formerly working class area like Battersea now 'seem to attract Sloane Ranger Conservatives and the City new Right'.¹¹⁸ This process has been encouraged by

a policy of social and political restructuring through the labour market. [...] The policy in Wandsworth is to reduce Labour support through a massive selling off of the council stock to a new class of home owners. This is council-encouraged gentrification, and 17,000 (40%) of Wandsworth's 42,000 council homes have been sold — to sitting tenants or to developers for conversion into luxury apartments. The chair of Wandsworth's property sales committee was quoted in *The Guardian* (June 19, 1987) as saying that, 'I don't think any of us have ever tried to hide the fact that we have sought not just to run Wandsworth more efficiently, but to change Wandsworth into a Conservative borough that will stay

¹¹⁸Hamnett C (1990) 'London's turning' *Marxism Today* July p31.

This also has a profound impact on the ability of trade unions to respond to future threats. If the population of the Borough is increasingly wealthy and increasingly Conservative, then it will be more and more difficult to develop links with the users of services.

As private capital and right-wing politics move in to reclaim some of their lost spaces the network of institutional locales which sustained the Labour movement thins out. Then the isolation of trade unionists within their own workplaces becomes a crucial barrier to radical action.

In the final case study I will consider the situation in Milton Keynes, where this isolation is as acute as anywhere in the country.

Milton Keynes

Milton Keynes is a new town, or, as the Development Corporation would have it, a new city. Unlike the other three case studies, which are all covered now by a single tier of local government, Milton Keynes is the province of three different local authorities with different and sometimes overlapping responsibilities. This case study considers the area occupied by the Milton Keynes Development Corporation (MKDC) which includes all the main built-up areas in the Borough of Milton Keynes with the exception of Newport Pagnell in the centre of the Borough and Olney in the north. As this implies, the area covered by the Borough Council is bigger than that occupied by the 'designated area' of the MKDC. The Borough covers one sixth of the area of Buckinghamshire in the north of the County, and Buckinghamshire County Council is thus the third of the three local authorities with responsibility for the area.

The new city of Milton Keynes

Local government in Milton Keynes cannot be understood without reference to the

¹¹⁹*Ibid.* p31.

new towns programme in Britain, which is, according to Paul Lawless and Frank Brown, 'the most important achievement of the post-1945 town planning movement'.¹²⁰ Development in the new towns was controlled by development corporations which were appointed by the Government. They were the prime agents in the acquisition of land and the planning of its development by private and public sector bodies. Fourteen 'Mark I' new towns were designated between 1946 and 1950 including Stevenage (the first), Harlow, Basildon and Bracknell. Many of these were to take 'overspill' population from London. Interest waned during the 1950s when only one further designation was made, but revived in the 1960s. The 'Mark II' towns began with Skelmersdale in 1961. Milton Keynes was one of the last and was designated in 1967.

The designated area included the existing small towns of Stony Stratford, Bletchley and Wolverton, of which the last two were important centres for the railway industry. The population of the area in 1967 was approximately 40,000 and it covered land administered by five Urban and Rural District Councils. At the time of local government reorganisation four of these, together with four parishes from the fifth, were amalgamated to form the Borough of Milton Keynes. The planning of the city was linked to explicit social goals, which read (with hindsight) as almost naively optimistic. A similar optimism characterised the hope of the planners that the built form of the city could be used, in conjunction with planned economic development, to achieve these goals:

From the beginning the Corporation has taken the view that the planning of the new city should be related to clear and explicit social goals. The Corporation intends that the Plan should describe and define the character of life which it is the new city's aim to provide and which the proposals are intended to achieve. This applies not only to the physical plan for the new city but to all the other proposals, social and economic.¹²¹

Employment was initially concentrated in the existing settlements, particularly

¹²⁰Lawless P and Brown F (1986) *Urban growth and change in Britain* (London: Harper and Row) p133.

¹²¹Milton Keynes Development Corporation (1970) *The plan for Milton Keynes: volume one* (Milton Keynes: MKDC) p9.

Wolverton and Bletchley. This meant that in 1971 just 28% of the economically active male population was employed in non-manual occupations compared with an average for South-East England of 42.7%.¹²² Employment in the North of the City was dominated by the strongly unionised British Rail Engineering Works at Wolverton and in the South by manufacturing industry in Bletchley. Trade unionism was overwhelmingly male and organised along traditional lines. The NUR¹²³ and ASLEF¹²⁴ were major local trade unions and their organisations in the area were marked by a distinct lack of radicalism.

Employment growth since the early 1970s has included jobs in the manufacturing sector, but distribution and services have been of the greatest significance. The trade unions have found it difficult to get a foothold in these industries. By 1981 40% of households had heads in non-manual occupations and although the proportion of employment taken up by manufacturing was, at 31.5%, above the British average, the industrial structure of the Borough was dominated by distribution, catering, transport and other services, with 58.1% of all employment.¹²⁵

The locally low levels of unionisation in the new industries and offices of the private sector, combined with the rapid growth of employment in these sectors is a particularly stark manifestation of the trends in unionisation discussed above in Chapter One. To its credit the national leadership of the labour movement identified Milton Keynes as a key area for future union recruitment. Writing of proposals by TUC General Secretary Norman Willis to rejuvenate the TUC Bassett claims that

what Mr Willis is trying to do is carve out a new role for the TUC by proposing it plays a central role in the area of union recruitment: mounting and governing TUC and union

¹²²Champion AG, Clegg K and Davies RL (1977) *Facts about the new towns: a socio-economic digest* (Corbridge: Retailing and Planning Associates) p154.

¹²³National Union of Railwaymen.

¹²⁴Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen.

¹²⁵Figures derived from Central Statistical Office (1981) *Key statistics for local authorities* (London: HMSO) pp31 and 59.

membership drives in non-union areas such as Milton Keynes.¹²⁶

Nonetheless it remains the case that outside its historic and declining strongholds, the unions have very low levels of penetration in the private sector in Milton Keynes.

The principal area which has seen both expansion with the growth of the city, and a degree of unionisation has been public services. Many of the manual workers who joined the Development Corporation or the Borough Council when they were first established had experience of local government employment in other authorities, and experience of local government trade unionism. According to a local trade unionist I spoke to, workers who had moved into the area from London were more radical than the local 'old hands on Bletchley and Newport Pagnell' [councils]. The Londoners had 'some sort of an industrial background' and consequently 'knew the crack', but they were in 'a small minority'.¹²⁷ In the early 1980s membership in the NUPE branch which covered the Council and the Corporation was rising through recruitment but, the interviewee claimed, there was 'no solid commitment to trade unionism' which was seen as 'a bit of an insurance policy'.¹²⁸

Today, contracting out has reduced the manual workforces in local government in the area. The number of manual workers directly employed by the Borough Council in Milton Keynes is dramatically lower than in the other case studies. In Manchester, for example, there is one City Council manual worker for every 35 residents while in Milton Keynes there is one Borough Council worker for every 537 residents.¹²⁹ Of course the Development Corporation and the County Council also maintain manual workforces, but the difference is nonetheless

¹²⁶Bassett P (1988) 'Less policy, more action' *Financial Times* 22 July.

¹²⁷Interview with the author, 6 December 1989.

¹²⁸Interview with the author, 6 December 1989.

¹²⁹Figures derived from Manchester City Council (1988) *Official handbook 1988/89* (Manchester: Manchester City Council) and Borough of Milton Keynes (1989) *Facts and figures 1989/90* (Milton Keynes: Borough of Milton Keynes).

dramatic. Even allowing for these small workforces, the numbers of union members on the manual side are very low. One full time officer told me that by the late 1980s there were just 150 NUPE members in the Council and Corporation workforces and that most of these were concentrated in horticulture.¹³⁰ Small pockets of craft unionism also exist and are significant for the response to restructuring. In the building maintenance service the EETPU organises the electricians and the plumbers and the UCATT organises the painters and decorators while the bricklayers are GMB. (The GMB also organises the Council's transport workers.) As is in many areas, the craft unions are strong with 100% membership in the relevant trades, but they are small in number.

In Milton Keynes, as elsewhere, it was difficult to obtain exact membership figures for any of the unions, but unionisation on the non-manual side is also low, though almost certainly higher than in similar occupations in the private sector. A full-time official estimated the number of NALGO members in Milton Keynes as being in the low hundreds.¹³¹ NALGO members in local government in Milton Keynes are among the most moderate in the country. The organisational structure of NALGO is one which accords considerable autonomy to local branches. In Milton Keynes this autonomy was exercised in the early 1980s when the branch agreed to give eight weeks notice of industrial action in exchange for two additional salary increments. A NALGO full-time officer said that this had led to

a philosophy and culture in Milton Keynes of 'we don't take strike action'. [This] is something perhaps that they will have to look at in future because at the moment the services which have been identified for privatisation are mainly manual worker dominated in terms of who provides the actual service. There are certain implications for office staff, but they have not really felt the chill wind as it were. But clearly once you start talking about architecture, finance, legal services and all the rest of it, then I think they will start to

¹³⁰The horticultural activities of local government in Milton Keynes are of considerable importance, since a green image of the city is one which its planners and public relations officials are very keen to stress. At the time of my research (1989) the gardening staff seemed to have been partly insulated from major restructuring by the lack of pressure for cuts in the service or for privatisation.

¹³¹Interview with the author, 5 December 1989.

realise that the axe is about to hit the jobs that they are doing.¹³²

During NALGO's national pay dispute in 1989, the Milton Keynes branch was the only one in the country which did not participate in the national action.

The impact of local government restructuring: a triple structure in flux

This limited and weakly organised pattern of public sector trade unionism in Milton Keynes has had to face an almost continuous process of change in the provision and management of local government services in the city. Much of this restructuring has stemmed from the consequences of the dramatic growth of population and economic activity on a greenfield site. In other cases change has been more directly politically inspired. The developments have been somewhat disparate, but they have rarely worked in the trade unions' favour.

The new city has grown rapidly since 1971 and continues to expand: by 1989 the population of the Borough had reached 176,000. However, this bald figure disguises major changes in the political economy of urban development in the city. The city was designated in the era of Wilsonian modernisation and this is reflected in the Plan. The public sector was clearly expected to play a crucial role in service provision for the population. For example, the Plan laid stress on the role of 'a comfortable, fast and convenient' public transport system,¹³³ and calculated that the superior efficiency of the road network would ensure that a bus service charging fares at a rate per mile 'commonly accepted' would be 'at least twice as good as is commonly found today'.¹³⁴ Following the deregulation and privatisation of public transport in the 1980s by the Thatcher Government, no resident would recognise this as a description of the local bus service.

Although greater stress was placed on private sector housing development than had been the case in other new towns in the past,¹³⁵ it is clear that the planners

¹³²Interview with the author 5 December 1989.

¹³³Milton Keynes Development Corporation *op. cit.* p15.

¹³⁴*Ibid.* p34.

¹³⁵Milton Keynes Development Corporation *op. cit.* pp53-56.

envisaged public sector housing to be the main provider of accommodation at least in the medium term, with the longer term goal that 50% of the residents should be in owner occupation. By 1988 this figure had already reached 70% and with the development of further public sector housing at a near standstill and a high priority being given to both selling public housing to sitting tenants and encouraging private developers to build new houses it looks set to rise still further.

Although the originators of the new towns programme appear to have given little thought to the winding-up of the Development Corporations, the expectation appears to have been that the assets of the Corporations would be transferred to the relevant local authority when the time came.¹³⁶ It is expected that the MKDC will be wound up in 1992, but it is far from clear that there will be a transfer of responsibilities to the Borough. Indeed a number of developments suggest that the Corporation has been seeking alternatives to public provision after its demise.

In 1988 the Development Corporation unilaterally ended the agency agreement with the Council under which the Council managed the Corporation's rental housing stock. National legislation had given local authority tenants the right to opt out of local authority control en masse. The Council perceived this as a threat to its hopes to take over the ownership of the Corporation's housing after 1992. It attempted to pre-empt any such move by conducting a survey of tenants to discover the preferred future owners of the housing stock. Angered by what it claimed was a misuse of the Council's position in trying to influence the tenants the Corporation ended the agreement. It is clear that even if it was not acting under direct instructions from central Government the Corporation was certainly adopting a position entirely compatible with that of the centre. It may not be coincidence that the announcement coincided with a visit by the Housing Minister, William Waldegrave, when he visited a new housing scheme and met MKDC officers.

¹³⁶Aldridge M (1979) *The British new towns: a programme without a policy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul) pp84-5.

This incident had profound effects for some of the workforce and these will be discussed below. It exemplifies the changing character of the Corporation from its original role as a vehicle for Keynesian modernisation based on planning towards a private-sector dominated agency of central government, rather along the lines of the later Urban Development Corporations. If Newcastle and Manchester can be seen partly as spaces for labour and the public sector, Milton Keynes has become a space for de-regulated private capital in financial services, high technology manufacturing, retail and foreign inward investment.

The determination of the MKDC to transfer its operations to the private sector in advance of its inevitable demise is also shown in the support it has given for its professional staff to engage in management and employee buy outs of their departments. In many new town development corporations, architects, accountants and planners have been made redundant. In some cases, including that of Milton Keynes, they have then been effectively re-employed as private contractors after they have used their redundancy payments to set up as private companies. This strategy was condemned by the House of Commons:

The MPs reserve[d] their strongest criticism for the Department of the Environment, accusing it of failing to examine the operation. They point[ed] out that Milton Keynes did not keep costing records of the new ventures 'to demonstrate that propriety, regularity, and the need for value for money had been observed'.¹³⁷

The relationship between the Development Corporation and the Borough Council has thus been of key importance in the pattern of change in local government in the area. The Borough Council too has been undergoing significant change throughout the 1980s. To a very large extent these stem from the dramatic demographic growth in the area. According to a very senior official at the Council,

local government in Milton Keynes is growth-led, rather than recession-led as it might be in other areas. In addition there is the question of in-migration and forming a society which means not only infrastructure and services, but also providing potential for non-organic growth. There is a different demographic profile in MK from anywhere else in the country. It is child led, with a high proportion of single parent families and a significant proportion

¹³⁷*The Guardian*, 14 June 1991.

This has led to a model of local administration which, the interviewee informed me, was 'nearer to Westminster than to Sheffield' but which was not driven by the demands of a wider political project. The reason for such a model is that rapid growth means that 'the single motivation has been to do it' no matter how. The dramatic economic and social changes in the area mean that the provision of services has had to be viewed from a highly pragmatic perspective. In some cases it seems that hiring outside contractors, for example, has been quite simply the only way to get the job done in the time available.

As the same officer put it, and in contrast with Manchester and Newcastle, where a complete reorganisation was undertaken for CCT, a wholesale change in departmental structures

would not be our first priority. We have been experimenting with different forms. Some management start ups and some 'aggressive' new DSOs. It is heavily dependent on the officers. What we often aim for is a very effective DSO not to preserve DSOs, but to provide the service. Let's see who'll do the best job.¹³⁹

This view was supported by a full-time union official:

The willingness to let contracts to the private sector probably stems from the difficulty of recruiting staff. If it stays in the public sector, either there are staff shortages, and the service isn't provided, or there are budget overruns. Therefore the officers aren't putting up much of a fight to keep things public.¹⁴⁰

The dominant ethos is thus one of practical managerialism, a tendency which is reinforced by the political situation in the Council, which was 'hung' throughout the 1980s.¹⁴¹

As is often the case, this led to considerable power accruing to the officers of the Council. When I asked about the relationship between officers and members the senior officer told me:

Generally the relationship is good. There is a very large degree of delegation of authority to

¹³⁸Interview with the author, 21 February 1990.

¹³⁹Interview with the author, 21 February 1990.

¹⁴⁰Interview with the author, 12 December 1989.

officers, which is good.¹⁴² Milton Keynes is changing so rapidly that if all decisions had to be referred to the members nothing would get done. To keep things running smoothly, especially because it is a hung Council, there are regular meetings between the top politicians, the Chief Executive and the Directors of Finance and Law.¹⁴³

This lack of effective political control is a feature of 'hung' councils but that is not to say that Party politics is absent from local government in Milton Keynes. Throughout the 1980s the Labour Party was the largest group on the Council, but the Council was controlled by an alliance of the Conservatives and the centre parties.

This control by the right was particularly evident in the industrial relations situation on the Council in the early 1980s, when according to my interviewee management practices were 'fairly neanderthal, [...] fairly repressive'. A decision to privatise the refuse collection service was characteristic of the sorts of policies being pursued at the time only in right-wing local authorities like Wandsworth, and this will be discussed in more detail below. The existence of a tradition of private provision meant that no major initiatives were taken to resist CCT, although it had considerable impact on the way in which services were managed:

This year saw the impact on the Finance Department of the administrative workload brought by the introduction of the Community Charge in 1990, together with additional costs. This has come at the same time as Government legislation on putting council services out to competitive tendering and officers have had to put in many hours on preparing specifications for building cleaning, catering, landscape maintenance, vehicle maintenance and management of leisure facilities. To cope with what is virtually a change of culture for local government, the Council began a review of its own structure and plans

¹⁴¹The Labour Party gained control in May 1990.

¹⁴²Symptomatic of this delegation was my own experience of trying to arrange an interview with the Council's leader. The reply to my request came in the end from the senior officer whose views I have quoted:

Dear Mr Painter,

You wrote to Councillor H_____ on 23rd January regarding a research programme about the change in the nature of local government in Britain since 1979. Councillor H_____ has passed your letter to me and suggested that it might be more helpful if you were to discuss the theme which you are investigating with myself as Councillor H_____ felt that I might be able to make a greater contribution to your research than he could. [...]

Yours sincerely,

By contrast, in all the other cases studies I was able to arrange interviews directly with either the Leader, the Deputy Leader or the Councillor responsible for compulsory competitive tendering.

¹⁴³Interview with the author, 21 February 1990.

to implement its findings next year [1989-90 — JP].¹⁴⁴

There are, however, some areas in which there is a commitment to public provision, including horticulture. As one full-time union officer put it:

Parts of the service elected members are proud of and want to keep, like horticulture, because of the prestige and the high quality provided by the in-house work force. As a result officers bent over backwards to keep it in-house, they were convinced that no-one could do it so well. They divided the city into two, largely on a geographical basis and let the first 50%. The contract was designed to make it unattractive to the private sector, by lumping lucrative bits like grass-cutting in with the rest.¹⁴⁵

The staff shortages mentioned above are particularly acute in the white collar grades where the Council has brought in a performance related pay structure which breaks away from nationally negotiated salary scales. NALGO nationally opposes such policies, but the autonomy of the local branch and its relative weakness in Milton Keynes meant that the national union was unable to prevent the system being introduced. As well as helping tackle recruitment problems the Council sees this change as part of shift from 'industrial relations' to 'human resources development' — paralleling management ideology in the private sector, and according to the senior officer I spoke to, leading it.¹⁴⁶

The problems of isolation

NALGO's responses at the local level to the changes in local government in Milton Keynes have been to go along with, or even actively to support the policies of the Council. According to a NALGO full-time official, NALGO's District Council covering Milton Keynes voted to accept the principal of management buyouts, which are rejected by the national joint union strategy on CCT as merely another form of privatisation. In addition, as I suggested above, the local branch struck what was effectively a no strike agreement: probably the first ever in the public sector.

¹⁴⁴Borough of Milton Keynes (1989) *Annual report 1988/89* (Milton Keynes: Borough of Milton Keynes) p18.

¹⁴⁵Interview with the author, 12 December 1989.

¹⁴⁶Interview with the author, 21 February 1990.

Among the manual workers responses to local government restructuring have been more vigorous, but not very much more effective: it will clearly be a long, slow haul to establish new traditions of public service trade unionism in the area. However there are signs that all is not lost. In the early 1980s the manual unions in Milton Keynes were defeated in the battle over street cleaning and refuse collection. As was the case in the early battles in Wandsworth, the strategies adopted were those of the defensive militancy of the 1970s. Unlike Wandsworth, however, there were few resources available to the unions in terms of support from other unions or familiarity with, and commitment to, radical trade unionism. There was therefore little chance to learn the lessons and begin the process of transformation which was started in Wandsworth. However, the continued presence of the craft unions in the workforce, who were not involved in the earlier dispute, did provide a small pocket of continuing commitment to trade unionism. This was threatened in 1988 with the decision of the MKDC to revoke the housing management agreement, which covered, among other things, maintenance. The craft union shop stewards campaigned successfully to prevent the privatisation of the service. However, it is difficult to see this small victory as the basis for a reinvigoration of local government trade unionism in the Borough.

In late 1981, as had happened in Wandsworth a year earlier, Milton Keynes Borough Council used the threat of privatisation to force the refuse service workers to accept a programme of cuts and efficiency improvements. Three of the thirteen refuse vehicles were taken out of service. In return for this the council agreed that privatisation would not be raised again for a year.¹⁴⁷ During August and September of 1982 industrial relations in the refuse service deteriorated dramatically with the Chief Executive of the council withdrawing trade union facilities for the shop stewards and refusing to negotiate with the NUPE branch secretary and chair.

¹⁴⁷ *Community Action* (1983) 'Muck, money and mass sackings in Milton Keynes' *Community Action* 63 pp16-26.

Instead the management would only negotiate with workforce representatives they had approved. The secretary had previously been sacked for trade union activity in 1981, and the chair worked not for the council, but for the Development Corporation.

The union's tactics were to mount a campaign to persuade the council not to privatise the service. However the vigour of the campaign was patchy. Management's attempts to obstruct the normal conduct of trade union activity and their direct approaches to the workforce which intimidated some workers from taking action meant that the efforts of the branch officers and shop stewards were frustrated. Leaflets which were to have been delivered to residents by refuse collectors while on their rounds were found dumped. The then branch secretary puts this down to a combination of apathy and fear of disobeying management directives:

The members were supposed to deliver them on the rounds, but under pressure from the supervisors many were tipped.¹⁴⁸

On 4 October 1982 the council voted by a margin of one to invite tenders for the refuse and street cleaning services. Two days later the Bletchley trades council voted unanimously to mount a campaign against privatisation, but this too was to be unsuccessful. The organisation of the branch was in disarray. One shop steward had been sacked and one forced to resign by the council. Another was off sick and the fourth resigned when his colleagues at a mass meeting insisted on hearing what a private contractor might offer.¹⁴⁹ Without strong commitment from the workers and no effective shop steward or lay officer organisation to develop it, the campaign was ineffective. On 21 December the contract was awarded to Exclusive Cleansing Group to start on 1 April 1983.

On the first day of the new contract a small number of the more radical trade

¹⁴⁸Interview with the author, 6 December 1989.

¹⁴⁹*Community Action op. cit.* p20.

unionists, those with a London background, took direct action by surrounding the Civic Offices with dustcarts, but in the absence of any support from the rest of the workforce this was doomed to be simply a defiant gesture. The Branch Secretary of NUPE at the time told me that the 'locals were hostile to an outsider like me'¹⁵⁰ and like the actions of the Londoners this suggests that the importation of radical traditions from elsewhere is not necessarily a route to success.

The company which took over from Exclusive when the contract came up for renewal was Municipal Cleansing, a subsidiary of Lee-Ray Engineering. Lee-Ray Engineering is owned by the former Conservative leader of the Council and its former Chief Executive Officer. Municipal has apparently signed a single union agreement (a so-called 'sweetheart deal') with the GMB, suggesting that any support that NUPE might have sought from the other union would not have been forthcoming. The competition for members found in Manchester is evident here too, then, but whereas the strength of the joint working approach in Manchester has enabled it to survive such strains, the absence of strong union organisations in Milton Keynes means that divisions in the labour movement can be fatally weakening.

Another division was one within NUPE itself and stemmed from the uneven adoption in the area of NUPE's reorganisation plan proposed in the Warwick Report. This report which the national union organisation commissioned from Warwick University in 1974 proposed the establishment of a full shop steward system. This had apparently been adopted in the Development Corporation but not in the Borough Council. Although the council workers had elected stewards, they were less experienced and effective than those in the Development Corporation. Members with problems continued to consult the branch officials in the first instance. A certain degree of hostility is also seems to have existed from the Council stewards towards the relatively more militant and better organised

¹⁵⁰Interview with the author, 6 December 1989.

representatives in MKDC. Again this made it difficult for the workers in the cleansing department to gain wider support.

This defeat did not result in the complete eradication of manual trade unionism in the Council. The craft trades were always strongly organised with a developed system of shop stewards, and when one of their departmental strongholds was threatened with privatisation in 1988 the outcome of the dispute was rather different. The decision of the MKDC to terminate the housing management agreement with the council meant that the future of the Council's in-house building maintenance department was thrown into doubt. The management of the organisation was concerned that there was not enough work among the council's own properties to justify maintaining a separate DSO. In addition the sale of housing under the 'right to buy' legislation was decreasing the council's stock.

At about the same time the council was gearing up for the reorganisation which would be required to deal with the CCT legislation. Management consultants were commissioned to generate proposals for the restructuring involved. They suggested that all the affected services should be brought under one DSO with a unified management structure headed by a General Manager. The council accepted this proposal. In addition, however:

The Consultants [*sic*] view is that the Council should take the opportunity to concentrate on making the DSO's [*sic*] truly competitive before considering any company option [including management start ups].¹⁵¹

In the event, the Council did not follow this advice and agreed that where management of existing Direct Service Organisation wished to bring forward proposals to buy-out the assets and run the department concerned as a private company, then they would be accepted, provided a majority of the workers who would be affected agreed to the proposals. A Labour Councillor told me that:

the management suggested heavily that all DSO units should draw up plans for MBOs.

¹⁵¹Report by Council officers to the Policy and Resources Committee.

Transport did put one in, but the manager wasn't really committed to it.¹⁵² Management services also did. The managers of the Building Maintenance DSO proposed a management buy-out [MBO] along the lines of the ones in Bath District Council.¹⁵³

The apparent logic of this decision was that a private organisation would be able to take on work for other clients and thereby maintain its viability in the face of the council house sales and the ending of the management agreement with the Corporation.

The union response to the proposal reflects many of the problems of organising in areas where traditions of trade unionism are weak and fragmented. In the first place the local union hierarchies were by no means opposed to the MBO proposals. This is despite the fact that national union policy is opposed to buy-outs on principle since they involve the privatisation of a public service, and because, while the immediate prospects in the private sector may appear bright, the long term security and protected terms and conditions which the public sector can potentially provide are lost. At the national level it was only in NALGO that I found slight equivocation over this issue. Notwithstanding the joint union position, one national official in NALGO told me that,

this is an area where we can conflict with the manual unions quite easily. It is our policy that we do not support management buy-outs because they are privatisation by any other name. They don't have a high success rate and we are against them on principle. But then what do we do with reality? We have districts where our members are making the decisions and they are being told that the best option is to take the business on themselves. So what do we do?¹⁵⁴

As I stated above, the local District Committee of NALGO did indeed support the idea of MBOs. The full-time officers of the craft unions whose members would be directly affected by any decision decided to leave it up to their membership to decide. The local political activist who was the moving light behind the campaign to oppose the use of a buy-out argued that this stance represented an abdication of

¹⁵²According to a Labour Councillor, the workforce voted 62-4 against the proposal.

¹⁵³Interview with the author, 29 November 1989. Bath DC is famous (notorious?) among anti-privatisation campaigners for its strategy of management buy-outs.

¹⁵⁴Interview with the author, 11 May 1989.

leadership, and that the local union officers should have taken a principled stand to defend the public sector. However, the unions concerned were all unions with large private sector memberships and they have generally had a more ambivalent attitude to privatisation than some Labour Party activists or NUPE, for example.

A campaign was launched to try to persuade a majority of the workforce to vote against the MBO proposal and thereby to retain the building maintenance service in the public sector. This campaign mobilised the shop stewards of the various craft unions involved, and was coordinated by a local Labour Councillor, with a particular interest in housing. It was hoped that by putting forward the case for retaining the service in-house enough workers would vote against the proposal to defeat it. The arguments were put forward by word of mouth (the entire staff numbered only about 50), and through a regular newsletter. It was suggested that the management were not putting out balanced information concerning the prospects of a private company and were not investigating alternative sources of work in the public sector.

According to the shop stewards involved, the campaign held weekly meetings from June 1989 to discuss tactics and the progress that was being made, as one of them explained:

N_____ approached us and got the meetings going. We thought we should get both sides of the story on the management buy-out. We published a newsletter which contained the facts, such as how much of the market was really being won. At first the blokes thought that if they didn't go private then they would go down the pan.¹⁵⁵

There were also differences between the various trades. A UCATT member claimed that

the main block [against privatisation] was the painters. They were always against. The painters don't work at the depot, they don't meet other tradesmen. The managers managed to split it down the middle.¹⁵⁶

By contrast the carpenters were mostly in favour of the buy-out. These

¹⁵⁵Interview with the author, 12 February 1990.

¹⁵⁶Interview with the author, 12 February 1990.

differences seem to stem partly from the differential impact of the proposed post-privatisation bonus scheme, and the perception of the amount of work that would be available for the different trades in the private sector.

The lack of support from the full-time offices was felt to be an important impediment to success, with the EETPU officer going as far as to write to the management condemning the campaign's newsletter.

A second ballot was taken and the 46 votes cast by manual workers were split evenly for and against the proposal for an MBO. With no clear majority in favour of privatisation, the MBO proposals were rejected by the Council.

While this action was a success, it must be counted as a relatively modest one in comparison with the advances towards local government restructuring that have been made in Milton Keynes. It is difficult to see it becoming the basis of a reinvigorated grass roots trade unionism in Milton Keynes as the actions in Wandsworth and Newcastle have, albeit in rather different ways. When I spoke to the shop stewards involved in the campaign, the overwhelming attitude was one of disillusion. Many had worked all their lives for local councils; none had felt their work to be so undervalued as it is in Milton Keynes.¹⁵⁷

Gaining a foothold

This combination of weak organisation and low morale means that the prospects for public service trade unionism are bleak. This challenge has been taken up by at least one of the manual unions, NUPE, whose full-time officer for the area has committed herself to developing the membership in the area. Initially this might be through a system of 'postal stewards' where one member takes responsibility for the distribution of material to the others. This is already underway in the Hosptial. Then,

links between the members in different services could be developed in order to share

¹⁵⁷The existing involvement of private contractors for various tasks in the building maintenance service was a particular source of frustration, since the private sector's standards were felt to be

resources and expertise: the Open University, the Borough Council and the Hospital all have NUPE members who could usefully pool their experience.¹⁵⁸

The full-time officer identified many of the causes of the underdevelopment of trade unionism in the area, and all of these are related to the locales in which trade unionism takes place.

First, the area is on the geographical fringes of many of the trade unions' administrative areas. Most of the unions have their main area offices outside Milton Keynes (NUPE's is in Oxford, NALGO's in Reading) which means that there is less contact between the full-timers and the local branch officers, and no opportunity for social contact. In addition, within NUPE the area has always been the responsibility of the Assistant Divisional Officer, whose main responsibilities lie in the overall organisation of the union's Division. In this it differs from other parts of the Division which have officers whose sole concern is the membership in the area.

Second, the generally conservative politics of the area mean that local authorities are not keen to grant time off for trade union activities. Trade unionists have to work in their own time on union matters, and in an area with few traditions of trade union activity this makes it difficult to recruit stewards.

Third, high staff turnover (a product of the 'tightness' of the labour market) results in a very transient workforce which is difficult to organise. Manual staff in some public services in the area have turnover rates in excess of 100% per year. The tightness of the labour market ought to work in favour of trade unions since it gives them in principle a degree of power. But in order for this to occur a certain threshold percentage of the workforce would need to be brought into membership, so the unions are in a Catch-22 situation.

Fourth, Milton Keynes' status as a new town means that it has not developed much of a social centre which might form a focus of trade union activity. The

significantly lower than those of the council workforce.

¹⁵⁸Interview with the author, 12 December 1989.

interviewee would like to start using unspent branch funds on social activities in the local area to begin to build up something of a labour movement culture. This could be linked to education initiatives as had been done in the Division where she had previously worked. While shop-stewards in well organised areas often regard the full-time officers as conservative meddlers in their local affairs, in areas where trade unionism is acutely underdeveloped, commitment from a full-time officer to recruitment and education would seem to be a key prerequisite for future success.

All the cases of trade union action I have discussed here are closely influenced by the massive underdevelopment of the membership base and the limited traditions on which to draw. In addition the domination of policy by Council Officers has encouraged a particular managerial ideology of 'getting it done regardless' which has militated against the development of stable relations with the workforces. Finally, the split between the Borough and Corporation has divided public sector workers in the city and made the development of a united response acutely problematic.

Despite its distant roots in the tradition of post-War modernisation based on public sector investment and services, Milton Keynes has developed from the start into a ready made 'space for capital' any attempt by the organisations of labour to make inroads there will depend on developing forms of trade union organisation which are sensitive to this peculiar geographical context.

Conclusion

At the beginning of the Chapter I suggested that a research method based on case studies allowed both the characteristics of trade union action and its causes to be identified. I argued that a comparative approach would assist in this by disclosing the causal processes through which trade union action develops. In addition comparison allows the pattern of geographical differences in trade union action to be examined and *its* causes explained. It is clear from the studies I have presented here that the geography of local trade union responses to the restructuring of local

government are geographically constituted as well as geographically expressed. The institutional settings of trade unionism, which I have labelled locales, vary widely from place to place, and I believe that my research shows that it is these settings which are of crucial significance in both enabling and constraining the development of trade union action.

In each of the case studies I have presented what is in effect a narrative of certain events which took place in each of the local areas, which I think can clarify the operation of the causal processes. This in turn allows the elaboration of some more general points about what it is about 'places' which produce certain forms of trade union action in response to change and how these local responses build up to produce the unevenly developed landscape of local government trade unionism. I began to show what this involved by using the concept of locales to show how particular combinations of the settings of action generated very different sorts of responses in different places.

I now want to step back from the detail of the empirical cases and take this process further by drawing out some of these more general points about the causes of trade union action at the local level and its relationship to locales. At the beginning of the chapter I suggested that comparison between cases was a vital part of the explanation of both the character of the cases themselves and of the differences between them. I now want to substantiate these claims with reference to the case studies.

Firstly, in realist terms, the case studies I have presented do indeed suggest that it is the particular idiosyncratic combination of relations in a place which is the source of the differentiation of responses. Secondly, a comparison between the different cases indicates which particular sets of relations are central to the generation of action.

We can see that although it is straightforward to show that institutional relations take a particular form in one place, it is only by showing that they also

take a different form in another place that the *significance* of the relationship for the overall response is clarified. In Newcastle, for example, considerable emphasis was placed by the unions on developing a joint strategy with the users of services. If Newcastle is considered in isolation the significance of this is not immediately apparent: since joint campaigns of this sort had been encouraged by the national trade unions in the *Who Cares Wins* document, the Newcastle example might appear to be merely the application of policy at the local level and it might be assumed that similar responses would be found elsewhere. When the cases of Manchester and Milton Keynes are examined as well, however, it becomes clear not only that the Newcastle strategy is not an illustration of some general phenomenon, but also that the alliance with users of particular significance to both the nature of the response in Newcastle and its uniqueness. Moreover the *absence* of such alliances elsewhere can also be seen as an important determinant of the responses in those places too. However it is only *because* it is seen to be important in Newcastle that the significance of its absence elsewhere is made clear.

Drawing these sorts of comparisons between the different cases allows the identification of a set of key institutional relations or locales whose existence or otherwise, and whose character may be seen to be the most important influences on the nature of the local trade union responses. Some of these institutional settings are themselves the product of more general processes operating at the national or international scale. Thus the limits to relationships between trade unions and councils are partly determined by national legislation affecting local government and the trade union movement. In each case, however, it is the particular local manifestation of these processes, as the result of their combination with other circumstances in the local area, which affects local union action.

The first key relationship is that between the unions and the local authority. In all the case studies the character of this relationship was clearly of crucial importance in enabling and constraining particular types of union response.

Moreover, the comparison between the different studies demonstrates this centrality because it shows how different qualities of union-council relations can dramatically affect the unions' responses. The significance of joint-working in Manchester, for example contrasts with that of independent negotiation in Newcastle, outright hostility in Wandsworth and marginalisation in Milton Keynes.

The relationship between unions and local political parties (especially the Labour Party) is also significant, as is shown by the comparison of the 'disowning' of the unions by Labour in the early dispute in Wandsworth, the close, but paternalistic links between a particular union and the Party hierarchy in Newcastle, the importance of the commitment of an individual councillor in Milton Keynes, where the underdevelopment of trade union institutions means that individual agency can be particularly influential, and the historically distant links between unions and Party in Manchester leading to a particular form of subsequent incorporation of the unions into the council.

The relationship between unions and users has already been touched on. Its significance in influencing the union response may be seen particularly from the contrast between Newcastle and Wandsworth. In Wandsworth, the alienation of users from the refuse collection service meant that the support of users was not forthcoming, by contrast in Newcastle that support was actively built up. This lesson was also subsequently learnt in Wandsworth too as the dispute over the privatisation of estate management indicates.

Union-union relations are crucial too. Where these are relatively harmonious, as in Newcastle and Wandsworth, they have a positive impact on the unions' campaigns. Where there is hostility and disunity as is the case in Manchester, or where there are simply very few links, as in Milton Keynes, the impact tends to be deleterious.

Finally, there are a set of relationships which demonstrate that a locale is not necessarily local. There is the relationship between local and national union

organisations, and the use or otherwise that is made of the national campaign materials, or the support that is provided (or not provided) nationally for particular local disputes. This was particularly apparent in Wandsworth, where the early disputes did not gain the sort of support that the local activists felt was required. The links that the unionists in Newcastle were able to forge with SCAT were particularly significant, as were their use of other organisations and individuals in their initial campaign around CCT. They were able to bring people up from London for their seminars and meetings which might not have been possible for local unions with less good links.

The relationship with the regional union hierarchies is also influential. In Milton Keynes the acceptance by the NALGO district of the idea of management buy-outs was important, as was the organisational structure of the regional unions which tended to focus attention on areas away from Milton Keynes. Some of the regional officers in North West England tended to take a 'seen it all before' attitude to CCT which led them to play down the extent to which a fundamentally new strategy was required.

The links to private capital are not on the whole direct ones, but they are also important. In particular nationally available intelligence on the activities of private contracting companies has been important in a number of places in substantiating local campaigns.

These sets of relations appear as a result of the comparative study of the four areas to be the most significant in setting the scene for particular forms of trade union response. However, they cannot be added together arithmetically. Their real significance arises from their interaction in different places. What might appear to be promising preconditions in one place can fail to be realised because of the influence of other processes. By contrast two or more sets of conditions which on their own might appear of only limited import can be very influential when they interact. Thus the overall union response in a place is the product of the overlapping

network of locales which I described at the start of the chapter. It is this intermingling of what Giddens would call relations of presence and absence which provide or deny the unions and their members the particular combination of institutional resources which can allow the development of the responses. Thus both the *density* of the network of locales and its local, regional and national *extent* is important in characterising the 'complete' setting for trade union action.

All of these settings are being used and altered by the activities going on through them. It is in these sorts of ways that new institutional forms develop which may, through the process of struggle which such development involves, become dominant in the local area. This clearly resonates with the regulationist arguments about the impact of crises on social institutions which were discussed in Chapters 2 and 3. But what it also suggests is that the development of those new forms will be highly uneven, and that the eventual dominance of certain forms in a new national mode of regulation is likely to be geographically differentiated, contested and incomplete. I will return again to this issue in Chapter 8.

Before doing so, however, I want to consider how the characteristics of places beyond simply the network of locales of trade unions have implications for the development of radical union responses to all sorts of social and economic change. In addition to their own network of locales there are of course other networks which are likely to bear on the unions' responses. The local authority in each place and the private contracting companies all have their own networks, which overlap and interact with the unions' networks but which are also distinct from them. This suggests that the 'settings of settings' are also crucial and that, as Giddens points out, the features of settings may be taken as given for the analysis of strategic conduct, but should in the end be seen as also the product of social action. This brings the argument back to the character of the places where the union action occurs: the character which is in fact encapsulated in the concept of locality.

7 Place and trade union power

Contextual theory and trade union action

In the previous chapter I began to show what an interpretation of trade union action which takes seriously the constitutive role of geographical context might look like. I suggested that the trade union strategies developed in response to local government restructuring may be seen as emerging from the particular time-space settings, or 'locales' in which they are situated. Furthermore, the crucial locales in these cases were the networks of institutional relationships in which the unions are enmeshed. In some cases (such as Newcastle and Manchester) the 'positive' connections in the networks are dense and well-developed. In others, including Wandsworth and especially Milton Keynes, they are more sporadic and discontinuous.

Understanding the causes of these differences is of considerable political importance. While it is never going to be possible to 'replicate' straightforwardly the 'successful' responses in other places, precisely because the settings are so varied, it is possible to draw lessons from the cases I have presented concerning the sources of trade union power and the necessary preconditions for its realisation. Settings, as Giddens has pointed out, may be methodologically 'bracketed' and taken as givens in particular pieces of research. However, he insists that context too is a product of human agency and conflict and is therefore potentially transformable. I began to touch on this in my discussion of the changing demographic structure of Wandsworth, in which the 'locales' of union action were being deliberately remade by the local Council, and unconsciously 'squeezed' by the movement into the Borough of affluent middle class voters.

These changes have worked against the trade unions in Wandsworth, but there is of course no reason in principle why the opposite should not also occur in

other times and places. Contextual theory, of which Giddens' work is one variant, suggests that the geographical settings for action enter into the constitution of action. However this does not mean that action is somehow 'trapped' by geography. The settings are themselves in a process of transformation through action.

This may be seen in what I have rather grandly referred to as the battle by private capital to recapture its lost spaces. This should not be taken to mean that the spaces are somehow 'naturally' the province of capital and that their 'control' by labour is some temporary aberration, nor that labour cannot itself actively seek to reclaim spaces that it has lost. The outcome of the struggle is by no means a foregone conclusion. However, any attempt at reclamation must begin from the existing set of contexts. A key question thus emerges: can the places in which trade union action occurs be a source of power to the labour movement, or must they always limit its ability to develop trade union practices and a progressive politics? The answer may determine to a significant extent the geography of any 'post-Fordist' mode of regulation.

The urbanisation of labour?

'Space' and 'place' in the work of David Harvey

David Harvey's 'historico-geographical materialism' is one of the most sophisticated accounts of the operation of capitalist social relations in space developed since the radicalisation of human geography in the early 1970s. His aim is explicitly to formulate a 'revolutionary' theory capable of informing the practices required for a wholesale transformation of capitalist society.¹ Yet despite this objective, the impression that Harvey's work creates is one of a world whose geography is sculpted by the restless dynamic of capitalist accumulation. Each set of geographical barriers to accumulation is destructively overcome by a 'spatial fix'

¹Harvey D (1982) *The limits to capital* (Oxford: Blackwell) p451.

in which old places are devalorised and new ones thrown up. While the uneven development of capital is its liberator, as well as its prison, geography only ever seems to *disable* the development of progressive responses by labour.

These differences are highlighted in Harvey's use of the twin concepts of 'space' and 'place'. 'Space', for Harvey is a key source of social power:

Command over space, as every general and geopolitician knows, is of the utmost strategic significance in any power struggle. The same principle also applies within the world of commodity exchange. Every supermarket manager also knows that command over a strategic space within the overall construction of social space is worth its weight in gold. This value of space lies at the root of land rent. But spatial competition is always monopolistic competition, simply because two functions cannot occupy exactly the same location. Capture of strategic spaces within the overall space can confer much more than its aliquot share of control. [...] Control over strategic land parcels within the urban matrix confers immense power over the whole pattern of development. And although the liberation of space and the annihilation of space by time erode any permanent power that may attach to control of strategic spaces, the monopolistic element is always recreated afresh. Indeed, control over the production of spatial organization then becomes fundamental to the creation of new spatial monopolies. The importance of such monopoly power is precisely that it gives rise to monopoly rent and can thereby be converted into money.²

And, Harvey goes on to argue, a similar proposition can be advanced for the space of social reproduction, in the household, for example, or in the operation of political processes in the state. Under capitalism, Harvey suggests, space becomes commodified and hence homogenised:

Builders, engineers, and architects for their part showed how abstract representations of objective space could be combined with exploration of the concrete, malleable properties of materials in space. But these were all just islands of practice, light chorological nets thrown over a totality of social practices in which all manner of other conceptions of place and space — sacred and profane, symbolic, personal, animistic — could continue to function undisturbed. It took something more to consolidate space as universal, homogenous, objective, and abstract in most social practices. That 'something' was the buying and selling of space as a commodity. The effect was then to bring all space under the single measuring rod of money value.³

The effect of this, according to Harvey, is to replace an earlier emphasis on the absolute qualities of particular places with a concern for space in general; 'abstract' space in which the significance of locations is grounded in their interrelations rather than their inherent qualities:

the whole basis of urbanisation had to change. The preindustrial city had to be disciplined,

²Harvey D (1989) *The urban experience* (Oxford: Blackwell) p186.

weaned away as it were from its mercantilist proclivities, its monopolistic practices, and its assertion of the primacy of place over a capitalist organization of space in which relative rather than absolute locations had to dominate.⁴

Harvey recognises, however, that the 'homogenisation' of space is never complete. Firstly, the 'capitalist organisation of space' never totally subsumes the pre-capitalist 'assertion of the primacy of place'. Residual economic and political forms, and pre- or non-capitalist social practices may *re-assert* the 'primacy of place' (though they will not inevitably do so). Secondly, the same processes propelled by accumulation which serve (in Harvey's view) to homogenise space and eliminate the absolutes of place lead simultaneously to the fragmentation of abstract space. Thus the stage is set for a struggle over the occupation, use and significance of space. Drawing on Henri Lefebvre, Harvey comments:

The homogeneity of space is achieved through its total 'pulverisation' into freely alienable parcels of private property, to be bought and traded at will upon the market. The result is a permanent tension between the appropriation and use of space for individual and social purposes and the domination of space through private property, the state, and other forms of class and social power. This tension underlies the further fragmentation of otherwise homogenous space. For the ease with which both physical and social space could now be shaped - with all that this implies for the annihilation of the absolute qualities of place and of the privileged territoriality of traditional communities sealed off in aristocratic, religious, or royal quarters (among others) - poses a serious challenge to the social order. In whose image and to whose benefit is space to be shaped?⁵

For Harvey, however, the struggle over the appropriation of space in pre-revolutionary circumstances seems to have a foregone conclusion. As the dominant group loses control of some spaces it retains its power by shifting the locus of control into those areas it still occupies:

The bourgeoisie will always seek to shift authority, powers, and functions away from the spaces it cannot control into the spaces within which its hegemony prevails.⁶

Thus, according to Harvey, the growth of municipal socialism in the late nineteenth century fuelled the growth of the nation state:

The more the bourgeoisie lost control over urban centers, the more it asserted the dominant role of the nation state. It reinforced the authority of the spaces it could control over the

³*Ibid.* p177.

⁴*Ibid.* p28.

⁵*Ibid.* p177.

places it could not.⁷

It is fruitful to see the struggles of trade unions over local government restructuring in these terms. As Harvey's analysis confirms, that these are simultaneously struggles over the control of space. The municipalisation of public services in the post-war era saw private industry lose control not only of valuable markets and production facilities, but also of sites, land, property and crucially of political and symbolic spaces as well. The domination of inner-city economies by the public sector which I have discussed above represented the lost geography of capital.

Now Harvey's argument implies that such losses can be sustained for as long as capital can exploit its influence over other spaces (including other countries) in ways which allow it to maintain accumulation. Ultimately, however, the immanent crisis in the Fordist regime of accumulation asserted itself and alternatives had to be developed if capitalism was to survive. In Britain capital and the state began to experiment to see if it was possible to reclaim the lost spaces. The ensuing struggle has been the focus of this study.

In Harvey's account such crises can only be resolved in one of two ways. Either the crisis leads to a revolution and the complete elimination of capitalist social relations, or the imperatives of capital accumulation are re-imposed without mitigation as brutally as before:

What seems so extraordinary is that the overall rhythms of accumulation remain broadly intact in spite of the variations in the intensity of working-class struggle. But if we think it through, this is not, after all, so extraordinary. We still live in a capitalist society. And if that society has survived, then it must have done so by imposing those laws of accumulation whereby it reproduces itself. To put it this way is not to diminish working-class resistance but to show that a struggle to abolish the wages system and the domination of capital over labor must necessarily look to the day when the capitalist laws of accumulation are themselves relegated to the history books. And until that day, the capitalist laws of accumulation, replete with all of their internal contradictions, must necessarily remain the guiding force in our history.⁸

⁶*Ibid.* p57.

⁷*Ibid.* p33.

⁸*Ibid.* p189

Whatever merits such a formulation has for Harvey's own political project, it is rather inadequate as a characterisation of the struggle over local government restructuring which I have considered here. Moreover it fails to take into account the differences between accumulation before and after the crisis which regulation theory seeks to analyse. These shortcomings stem, I believe, from two aspects of Harvey's account which relate to his treatment of the relationship between 'place' and social (as he would have it, class) struggle.

Class and community

Harvey notes two ways in which 'geography' can be an impediment to capitalist urbanisation. Firstly, as I have already discussed, the drive to accumulate dissolves the absolute qualities of particular places into a universal and homogenous space, which, precisely because it is universal, becomes the object of struggle. Secondly, the dissolution of absolute qualities of place is never completed. Place continually reasserts itself, either in residual form, or through the differentiation of universal space into urban regions each exhibiting tendencies towards 'structured coherence' through the interaction of the process of accumulation and relatively inelastic urban labour markets.⁹

The first impediment can be overcome, so the argument goes, because capital can always out-manoeuvre the appropriation of some spaces by oppositional forces. As I have outlined, Harvey suggests that it does this by shifting the locus of power to those spaces it does control, or when this becomes inadequate because of crisis, it attempts a new spatial fix by retaking the lost spaces. Thus is capitalist hegemony re-asserted. The second impediment, that of place, can also be overcome. The 'production of space' (through the circulation of capital) tends 'to run up against sensitivity to place'.¹⁰ The capitalist response to this problem, according to Harvey, is to ensure that 'sensitivity to place' is not allowed to

⁹*Ibid.* p125-64.

¹⁰*Ibid.* p41, cf. pp182-4.

develop into a sensitivity to class. This is achieved through the creation of a sense of community. In an early formulation Harvey puts it like this:

The stability of [working class] neighbourhoods and of the value systems that characterize the people in them have been remarkable considering the dynamics of change in most capitalist cities. The reproduction of such value systems facilitates the reproduction of consumption classes as well as groupings with respect to the division of labour while it also functions to restrict mobility chances. [...] The homogenisation of life experiences which this restriction produces reinforces the tendency for relatively permanent social groupings to emerge within a relatively permanent structure of residential differentiation. Once this is translated into a social awareness that has the neighbourhood or the community as the focus and once this focus of social awareness becomes the basis for political action then 'community consciousness' replaces 'class consciousness' [...] as the springboard for action and the locus of social conflict.¹¹

Ten years later the sentiment is the same:

The alternative to [residential] dispersal lies in the application of doctrines of community improvement. As early as 1812, the Reverend Thomas Chalmers proposed to mobilize the 'spirit of community' as an antidote to class consciousness and its associated threat of revolutionary violence then engulfing the rapidly growing proletariat in British cities.¹²

As industrial capitalism developed in the nineteenth century,

[b]ourgeois surveillance of the family and interventions in the cultural, political, and social milieu of the working classes began in earnest. Above all, the ruling-class alliance had to find ways to invent a new tradition of community that could counter or absorb the antagonisms of class.¹³

The two inadequacies in Harvey's approach, then, are these. Firstly, by continually emphasising the ways in which capital and the dominant political forces reimpose their hegemony over lost spaces, Harvey loses sight of the real gains that the working class can make (and historically has made). That attempts to privatise local services are strongly resisted in some areas, and that the lost spaces of capital are strongly defended against capitalist attempts to reoccupy them shows that the struggle to reimpose capitalist hegemony need not result in either socialist revolution nor capitalist success. It is possible (this study suggests that in some cases it may be probable) that trade union action can prevent the reimposition of

¹¹Harvey D (1975) 'Class structure and residential differentiation' in Peel R, Chisholm M and Haggett P (eds) *Processes in physical and human geography: Bristol essays* (London: Heinemann) pp364-5.

¹²Harvey (1989) *The urban ...*, op. cit. p87.

¹³*Ibid.* p31.

capitalist social relations and that this need not lead directly, or even at all, to a revolutionary situation. Indeed the history of the labour movement in Britain has precisely involved the extraction of real material gains from capital and the state, *without* a socialist transformation.

Secondly the strength of many of those defensive struggles stems precisely from that insistent reassertion of place which Harvey sees as all too easily overcome by capital through the construction of community. To be fair, Harvey points out that 'the principle of community is not a bourgeois invention. It also has its authentic working class counterpart as a defensive and even offensive weapon in class struggle'.¹⁴ However for Harvey, this formulation is entered as a caveat, almost as an afterthought. For the most part it is not his aim to demonstrate how class consciousness could or should be generated, rather he seeks to show how, once emergent, it is neutralised by the imperatives of capital accumulation.

In the introduction to *The urban experience*, Harvey notes that,

the insertion of concepts of space and space relations, of place, locale, and milieu, into any social theory has the awkward habit of paralyzing that theory's central propositions [...] Marxists, employing a vocabulary appropriate to universal class relations, find neighbourhoods, communities, and nations that partition class struggle and capital accumulation into strange configurations of uneven geographical development'.¹⁵

While much of Harvey's work is dedicated to showing how continued accumulation is possible not only *in spite* of such partitioning, but, through the mechanism of the spatial fix, actually *by means* of it, he fails to provide a similarly sophisticated analysis of the operation of class struggle. When discussing the nature of 'place', it is not class consciousness which springs first to his mind, but reaction and, in more than one instance, fascism.¹⁶ For Harvey, geography is almost always disabling of class struggle: the spatial fix works for capital.

I want to suggest that this pessimism is misplaced. The 'urbanisation of

¹⁴*Ibid.* p87.

¹⁵*Ibid.* p5.

¹⁶*Ibid.* pp122-3 and 184; Harvey D (1989) *The condition of postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell) p277.

capital' which Harvey analyses so minutely should be seen as involving simultaneously the 'urbanisation of labour'. Class is always constituted concretely — it simply never exists as 'universal class relations' — and it is thus always articulated with other social relations such as racism and patriarchy, and mediated through a specific time-space context. This recognition has two consequences for an interpretation of the relationship between trade union practices and place. Firstly, the urbanisation of labour occurs within the patchwork of geographical differentiation generated, as Harvey sees it, by the operation of processes of capital accumulation. The inevitable relative fixity of this structure — the outcome of the spatial fix — both enables and constrains continued accumulation. One of the constraints is the opportunity it opens up for what Harvey calls a "‘relatively autonomous’ local politics",¹⁷ an opportunity we may extend to the sphere of trade union struggle. Secondly, as I have shown in Chapter Six, the trade unionists engaged in such 'relatively autonomous' struggle actively exploit the characteristics of the settings (including their cultural resources) in which trade unionism is constituted. These settings (the pattern of locales) are in turn the product of the temporary stability after the spatial fix. On the one hand, therefore trade unionists have no choice but to develop their strategies in the circumstances bequeathed from the immediate past. On the other, it is precisely these circumstances which can in some cases provide the resources for the development of a progressive politics which monitors and seeks actively to mould the conditions of its own production.

The politics of 'place'

I want to explore the first of these consequences through further consideration of Harvey's work, and in particular his notion of 'structured coherence' and the second by linking this to my discussion in the previous chapter of the concept of locales.

¹⁷Harvey (1989) *The urban ...*, *op. cit.* p125.

Structured coherence and trade union power

Stung by the rebukes of those he regards as 'defectors from the Marxist fold',¹⁸ Harvey insists that the diverse contradictory pattern of urban politics under capitalism can be accounted for within the 'generalities of Marxist theory'. To demonstrate this he turns to the concept of the local or urban labour market. Now it is central to the argument that local labour markets are relatively isolated one from another, but this does not tempt Harvey to pursue the common empiricist approach to local labour market definition on the criterion of arbitrarily determined degrees of 'self-containment'. Although the *concept* of daily commuting distance is seen as important since it determines the short-run options for employers for the exchange of labour power in terms of its quantity and quality, it is not thought helpful to attempt to draw definite lines on maps:

labor markets can overlap in space and tend in any case to fade out over space rather than end at some discrete boundary. The urban labor market is better thought of as a complex drainage basin with firmer delineations at its center than on its periphery.¹⁹

Harvey's argument is complex, but revolves around the notion of the 'structured coherence' of urban regions. In the short to medium term capital in the urban region faces constraints from two sources. Firstly, the quantitative and qualitative aspects of the labour force are relatively stable (in terms of numbers of workers, mix of skills etc.). Secondly, in order to exploit that reserve of labour power, capital must invest in fixed capital (buildings and plant) and requires an infrastructure. Notwithstanding Marshall Berman's powerful evocation²⁰ of the creatively destructive power of capitalist modernisation, the relative spatial fixity of capital and labour power limits capital's scope for action. In addition, the consumption patterns characteristic of each labour market area attain a degree of stability related to that of the labour force.

¹⁸*Ibid.* p125.

¹⁹*Ibid.* p128.

²⁰Berman M (1982) *All that is solid melts in to air* (London: Verso).

Harvey argues that these processes have two effects. Firstly, the region exhibits a tendency towards a 'structured coherence' defined around a particular 'technology of both production and consumption and a dominant set of class relations'. (Technology here is defined in broad terms as systems of organisation, as well as machinery.) Secondly, the short-run relative immobility of both capital and labour power means that the urban region is not simply at the whim of the capitalist imperative, but contains 'a political space within which a relatively autonomous urban politics can arise'.²¹ Harvey argues that this politics operates by means of regional class alliances. A ruling regional coalition of interests then has considerable power to direct the development of the area in particular ways. According to Harvey, very often the means by which the ruling coalition gains power, maintains its position and seeks to develop the economy, is its ability to mobilise a spirit of geographical community.

Now it seems to me that precisely the same argument that Harvey makes as a means of deriving the necessity of a relatively autonomous urban politics can be used in respect of trade union action. Since the unit of trade union organisation is the workplace within a labour market, the same relative stability of that labour market and tendency towards 'structured coherence' of the urban region will tend to produce a relatively stable (at least in the short to medium term) pattern of regional trade union structures and practices. Over time these patterns will evolve, change, grow, decline and be disrupted, as the character of the region does. Similarly they will form one of the factors which determines how the region itself fares.

This means that the relative, and always provisional, fixity of relations of production and consumption in a particular labour market will necessarily give labour a degree of power: capital cannot up and off overnight (although it can move remarkably rapidly in a recession!). The ability of the labour to realise this power would seem to depend in part on the extent to which the unions are able to enter

²¹ Harvey (1989) *The urban ...*, *op. cit.* p126.

into 'regional class alliances'.

The concrete research embodied in the local case studies discussed above supports this perspective. In all the case studies the relationship between the trade unions responding to the restructuring of local government and the ruling coalition has been paramount in influencing the union response. The ruling coalition is not limited to the formal local government machinery, although given the topic under consideration this is probably the most important part of it. In addition, however, the private sector contractors may be able to form their own alliances with the local authority (as happened in Wandsworth and Milton Keynes) and become partially co-opted to the coalition.

Thus in Newcastle, the ruling coalition is made up of the Labour Party and the GMB, with a secondary role for private capital such as huge Northern Engineering Industries. Here the union movement is not just in alliance with the coalition, but a part of it. However this is not true for all the unions. NUPE, for example, has a more marginal role in the formal politics of the region. But as I have suggested, the crucial factor here is the relationship *between* these elements. The fact that the GMB is part of the establishment gave the unions crucial credibility, while the partial exclusion of NUPE allowed it to develop a radical response without frightening the local authority. Since the unions were cooperating with one another as well, these two elements came together to produce the sort of strategic and influential response detailed in the preceding chapter.

By contrast, in Manchester the public service unions were not part of any ruling coalition. The historically established separation between the Labour Party and the trade unions in the city led to the unions being far more junior partners than is the case in Newcastle. They are accorded less autonomy and less respect by the council, and have found it concomitantly harder to develop an independent response.

In Wandsworth the transformation of the ruling coalition following the

change in local council control saw the complete marginalisation of the unions from influence with the authority. The new coalition was constituted of alliances of capital interests (local business, the private contracting sector and the Conservative Party). They were determined not merely to marginalise the unions, but also to break them up. In addition the alliance which previously existed between the Labour Group and the council unions broke down depriving the unions of crucial support.

In Milton Keynes the uneasy coalition of interests between the Borough Council Officers, the Development Corporation, local business, the Conservative and 'centre' parties found no room at all for the unions, who, with only limited and relatively uncommitted membership were unable to bargain their way to any position of influence. The securing of the refuse collection contract renewal by a company owned by the former Chief Executive and the leader of the Conservative group graphically illustrates in personal terms the way alliances between local state and private capital can operate, but of more significance for the unions today are the issues of recruitment and the establishment of proper union organisation in order that there is something with which to forge alliances in the future.

Locales and the (re)sources of radicalism

I have already described how the patterns of institutional networks in which trade unions are enmeshed may be seen as networks of locales which vary in their 'density' from place to place. In one sense the network of locales makes up part of the 'structured coherence' of the urban region, and their temporary stability over time contributes to the development of the relatively autonomous politics to which Harvey refers. The regional class alliances discussed above are, after all, constituted through locales. The formation of these alliances where that is possible is one way in which the trade unions capitalise on the resources which their locales provide.

Alliances are not always with the already powerful, however, and locales

can be empowering of the powerless. In the case studies, the locales within the local area were of particular significance for the transformation and radicalisation of trade union practices, because they involved the relations between the trade unions and the users of the services. These links also see the mobilisation of resources provided by their settings, and in ways which see the concept of place being used in rather different ways from those emphasised by Harvey.

For Harvey, 'place' under capitalism is first and foremost the basis for a conception of community. However, community is not (as Harvey intermittently admits) straightforwardly a reactionary or fascist concept. During the miners' strike of 1984-5 the very word gained almost iconic power on the left in Britain. Defending mining jobs became synonymous with defending (working class) communities. Where unions are able to mobilise around concepts of community and (implicitly) of place they are able to construct themselves as representative of a general (rather than merely a sectional) interest. This may (depending on the circumstances) be a class interest as well. The advantages as well as the limitations of this strategy were demonstrated in the case studies.

In Wandsworth the refuse anti-privatisation campaign was largely fought on the basis of jobs. Only after that defeat was more than lip service paid to the problems of mobilising the public around a notion of community. The contrast with the GLC is striking. While the unions were losing the battle over privatisation in Wandsworth, the Labour-controlled GLC was successfully emphasising the particularities of the situation in London through a radical transport policy. It is possible that part of the problem for the unions in Wandsworth was the lack of a coherent 'place' around which to mobilise, and it may be the case that a London-wide strategy is required in these situations. Yet the Conservative leadership in Wandsworth found it useful to try to construct a sense of community which they could then represent themselves as defending *against* the trade unions.

Although it is only one of ten local authorities in the conurbation, Manchester

City Council has the advantage of bearing the name around which any attempt by the unions to mobilise a sense of community would surely revolve. As the regional officers of NUPE pointed out, however, the fact that Manchester City Council is the authority for the employment and business centre of the conurbation means that many of the people using the council's services do not live in the authority and would not necessarily identify with the area. In addition the close alliance which has been established in formal terms between the trade unions and the council has led the unions to neglect the formation of alliances with community and other groups, preferring to leave this to the council, where it happens at all.

The potential advantage of such an approach is exemplified by Newcastle where the strong Geordie culture and sense of place is paralleled by union attempts to involve users in defence of 'their' services. Although the use of a rhetoric of place is absent from the unions' campaigns the rhetoric of 'community' is omnipresent. This is one of the principal sources of the political strength of the unions, assisted by a widespread acceptance of the trade union movement as part of the fabric of the regional scene.

The drive to create a sense of 'community' is expressed most starkly in Milton Keynes. In Milton Keynes all local institutions have an explicit interest in establishing the 'New City' as a 'real place'. For the union movement this is doubly hard. Not only does it have to pitch into this struggle along with the rest, but it also has to break the traditional labour movement identification with two much older 'places', Wolverton and Bletchley. The problems involved in this are graphically illustrated by the refusal of the Wolverton rail unions to even participate in the activities of the Milton Keynes Trades Council. The NUPE full-time officer with responsibility for the area explicitly cited the lack of an pre-existing sense of community as one cause of the problems of developing a commitment to trade unionism locally. With most of the users of local services recent in-migrants with no particular historical attachment to the area it is difficult to see how the unions

will be able successfully to compete with the far better resourced image makers employed by the local planning authorities to establish the sense of place of Milton Keynes through media advertising and glossy brochures. The resources provided by locales are thus objects of conflict in their own right. In principle there is scope for other agencies, such as the unions, to exploit the dissonance between the image and the experience of those who live in the area, but success again depends on the establishment of much stronger union organisation than exists at present.

Local union structures and practices thus draw a crucial part of their inspiration and strength from both the characteristics of particular places and the 'imagined communities'²² linked to them. This provides a general framework for thinking about both geographical variation in union power and the significance of place in the constitution of union power in general. Now it may be objected that this account contains a certain bias. Since the object of my empirical enquiry has been the union response to the restructuring of local government, there is bound to be a crucial role for geographical difference, since local government is so dramatically geographically differentiated. If I was looking at the automobile industry, for example, might I not find a much more homogenous union response.

There is some truth in this complaint. But I believe that the analysis in general still holds. That is, that grass-roots union action can only be theorised geographically. The geography of the car industry is different from that of local government, granted, but it has a geography none the less. Why, for example, are the workers at Ford's Southampton plant so much less radical than those at Dagenham? Why do nurses in Scotland prefer to join NUPE? Why was the so-called Union of Democratic Mineworkers established in Nottinghamshire? Why

²²A concept proposed by Benedict Anderson in his analysis of nationalism, but taken up more widely (for example in the work of Simon Duncan and Mark Goodwin) to refer to the political power of representations of 'localities' which might otherwise lack material coherence. See: Anderson B (1983) *Imagined communities: reflections on the origins and spread of nationalism* (London: Verso); Duncan S and Goodwin M (1988) *The local state and uneven development: behind the local government crisis* (Cambridge: Polity Press) p51.

were ambulance drivers in London and Liverpool the last to return to work after a strike? These question cannot be answered simply by reference to the geographical distribution of members, essential though such information is.

Awareness of these geographies leads back to the question raised insistently by Harvey as to how class (or other social struggles) can be generalised. I take this to raise a different issue than that of whether 'place' is reactionary. We may conceptualise 'place' as potentially progressive, as I have tried to do here, but that still raises the question of how radicalised workers in one area can act to change the contexts of trade union action in others. Harvey provides his own answer:

Capitalists may appeal to capitalists in other regions or to state authority to put down labor unrest, while workers may likewise build coalitions across urban regions and seek command of central state power for their own advantage.²³

And evidence of such developments are provided by my empirical research. A school dinner lady in Newcastle conveyed to me the excitement she felt about her discovery of other places where similar struggles were being waged and the importance she attached to the links she and her colleagues had made with trade unionists elsewhere. The activities of SCAT demonstrate the central importance of spreading information and advice between different localised organisations. And the national union organisations provide at least the potential that local struggles can be linked to provide the strength of a national campaign. Again these are all examples of the ways in which locales can stretch beyond 'the local' to enable (or constrain) what Giddens calls system, as opposed to social, integration.

The tendency that Harvey's work exhibits to gloss over such activities and emphasise continually the actions and dominance of capital stems from the lack of an analysis of human agency. The dichotomy of outcomes expressed in his work of brutal capitalist repression or socialist revolution is a false one. The revolution may be a long way off, but the evidence assembled here suggests that the creative

²³Harvey (1989) *The urban ...*, *op. cit.* p159.

response of trade unionists to the threats they face can, under certain conditions, affect the form taken by those processes of continued capital accumulation and the nature of any resolution of the crisis of Fordism. The refusal to allow some spaces to be recolonised by capital and the commitment in some areas to push the boundaries of exclusion ever wider suggests that incremental change and the learning process which goes with it may ultimately be a crucial part of any putative transition to socialism. Seeing how that can occur must involve an examination of the practices of those who will bring it about, and of the geography of those practices.

8 Conclusion: trade unions and the transition from Fordism

In this study I have tried to develop an account of trade union action in local government which is sensitive to the geographical contexts in which its day-to-day practices take place, but which also relates the development and potential transformation of those practices to wider shifts in the nature of public service provision and the role that it plays in the regulation of the social system. By doing so, I wanted to challenge the dominant representations of trade unionism as irrelevant to contemporary British society, and provide some limited additional resources for the future trade union struggles.

These are ambitious aims and I have no doubt fulfilled them only inadequately. Nonetheless they still seem to me to be worthwhile and in this brief conclusion I want to draw these themes together and consider what they suggest for the future.

I showed in Chapter 6 how attempts to restructure the provision of local government services in Britain have been subject to trade union struggles. As I suggested in earlier chapters, this attempted restructuring may be seen as an attempt by the Thatcher governments of the 1980s to chart a 'British road to post-Fordism'. As regulation theory stresses, any such attempt will be subject to social and political struggle as different social groups attempt to influence the direction of the transition. However, most writing in the regulation tradition does not investigate in any detail the content and substance of those struggles. Since it is their outcome which will determine the character of any successor to the mode of regulation of Fordism, it seems appropriate to try to investigate the nature of these conflicts, and the research presented in this thesis has been an attempt to do just that.

As the transition from Fordism has worked its way across the economic and

political landscape of Britain it has generated changes in both the localities and the locales through which trade union action is constituted. It is these changes to which trade unions are responding: changes to their immediate political and economic environments, whether at the local, national or international level. In each case, trade unions and their members try creatively to respond to the changes they face, drawing as they do so on the resources provided by the contexts in which they are located. Since the transition from Fordism does not merely affect those contexts, but actually occurs through them, the responses that trade unions make can potentially materially affect the course of the transition.

As I showed in earlier chapters, for regulation theory the transition between different modes of regulation involves the development of new institutional forms which emerge and may then either stabilise and become part of a new mode of regulation, or prove 'unsuccessful' and end up among Alain Lipietz's 'undeveloped prototypes'. The components of Britain's neo-liberal course to post-Fordism may thus be challenged and disrupted in their very emergence. Bob Jessop's characterisation of the neo-liberal path to post-Fordism which was discussed in Chapter 3 has a number of key elements which are being directly or indirectly challenged by trade union action in local government services. Of the principal characteristics of the path which Jessop identifies at least four are particularly relevant to the present discussion. These are the legislative and political attacks on the trade union movement; the attempts to increase the flexibility of labour markets; the recomposition of the welfare state; and the prioritisation of private provision and quasi-market forms of public services, especially through contracting out and competitive tendering.¹

All these aspects have been challenged by the trade unions. These challenges

¹Jessop B (1989) 'Conservative regimes and the transition to post-Fordism: the cases of Great Britain and West Germany' in Gottdiener M and Komninos N (eds) *Capitalist development and crisis theory: accumulation, regulation and spatial restructuring* (New York: St Martin's Press) pp261-299.

have not, however, been a matter of simple defence of the old, 'Fordist' forms. Rather, and as I have tried to show in detail in the account of my empirical research, they have involved a (usually unacknowledged) attempt to influence the course of the transition and to chart a rather different path to post-Fordism.

Attempts to restrict local government expenditure may be resisted by councils and unions; the privatisation and commodification of local services can founder on a combination of the relative autonomy of local authorities and the development of alternative policies and strategies for service delivery proposed and implemented by the trade unions. The attempt to make the local authority labour market more flexible and deregulated can be challenged by the determination of unions to retain nationally agreed levels of pay and conditions and bolster membership through new recruitment and the revitalisation of union organisational structures. The commercialisation of the relationship between public services and their users has been challenged through the development of very different forms of user involvement based on the direct participation of users with the workers in the elaboration of new models of public service provision.

A whole series of new forms are arising, from the establishment of an 'industrial union' for all local government employees (the result of a forthcoming merger between NUPE and NALGO) to the growth of these new alliances between service users and local trade unionists and from the 'no-strike' deal in Milton Keynes to the joint working arrangements in Manchester. Some of these new forms may have effects beyond the intentions of those involved in their establishment. Others are more likely to arise as a deliberate strategy, perhaps even where the unions perceive and understand the current changes as precisely the sort of 'structural changes' discussed in Chapter 2. In this case union struggles can become quite self-conscious attempts to exert control over the future development of public sector services and to retain and defend them as a desirable part of any new political and economic landscape.

In all cases, however, and for the reasons elaborated at length in Chapters 6 and 7, the struggles and changes will be highly geographically differentiated. The question of the political predominance of the new forms is also in part a question of their geographical predominance, not only in terms of their simple extensiveness, but also as a consequence of the significance of particular strategic places. This is why the struggle for the large cities is so crucial: they are both significant in terms of population and symbolic of the old Fordist order. To reiterate, the defence of their public services by trade unions is not a simple resistance to change, however, but a deliberate attempt to turn the path of change in a particular direction.

This means that precise nature of the 'post-Fordist' mode of regulation remains highly indeterminate: the components of the Thatcherite strategy are well known, but their imposition is by no means a foregone conclusion. The uneven development of the new forms is fundamental to their success or failure. The way unions are able to handle this unevenness, perhaps to turn it to their advantage by developing new strategies in particularly symbolic places, or by concentrating resources on the winnable battles, will be an important influence on the outcome of the struggles. To retain the 'battle' metaphor, there is in one sense a 'front line' along which the alternative futures embodied in different strategies meet. In those areas where the unions have been able to develop particularly innovative responses (in part because of the nature of the locales in which they are located) there is a 'leading edge' of change which may either emerge and develop elsewhere or wither if the Thatcherite strategy becomes more powerful. The character of the leading edge responses indicates the far reaching nature of some of the unions' attempts to deal with the changes facing them, suggesting that the even if the 'fundamental' nature of the transition is not always explicitly accepted by the unions, it is implicitly embodied in the new practices and structures.

Some of the 'leading edge' responses — those that are seeking in a particularly reflexive way to develop new and radical strategies — seem to have a

number of common characteristics, which emerge from the case studies. First, they involve the development of different forms of union organisation. For example, although women workers have long formed a large proportion of public service employees, the forms of trade unionism which they were offered were often dominated by the priorities of men. There are now signs that in at least some unions the organisational forms are beginning to change to allow women greater participation. More women are becoming active in unions and more women are gaining positions of power in unions (most noticeably, but still importantly, at the grassroots). One of the consequences of this change is that sections of the workforce, like cleaners and catering staff, who are often marginalised in the union movement, as well as in employment, are now in some places being listened to and involved in the development of union policy. I don't want to sound complacent here, as it is clear that at this stage change is limited and sporadic, but in at least some places it is there.

Second, the leading edge has seen connections being drawn far more between the production and consumption of public services. It was increasingly recognised that whatever the merits of the organisation of production typical of the public services in the 1960s and 1970s, the implications of them for service users were often that services were bureaucratic, poorly managed and unsuitable. Furthermore if 'user' was not be translated into 'customer' through the wholesale import of market-derived criteria for provision, the dislocation of production from consumption had to be repaired. Leading light in this manoeuvre was SCAT which, because of its base in both the trade unions and user groups (a legacy of the Community Action campaigns of the 1970s) was ideally placed to develop new strategies. The 'Seven-point Plan' explicitly emphasised the need to generate joint approaches between workers and users. This sort of approach has begun to be adopted more widely, starting in the aftermath of the defeat of the refuse collectors in Wandsworth and being taken up by the anti-compulsory tendering campaigns in

Newcastle and elsewhere.

Thirdly, the leading responses tend to stress the requirement for an independent trade unionism based on the participation of the workforce. In local government this is straightforward where the employer has no desire to incorporate the unions. In areas where incorporation is a possibility and where the council concerned is pursuing policies with which the unions are politically in sympathy, contradictions arise. The dilemma is starkly posed in Manchester where joint-working to deal with CCT has led to a degree of alienation of the rank and file activists. In Newcastle, by contrast, the unions have sought deliberately to maintain their independence and to base their strategy on grassroots mobilisation. On the other hand they were never offered a joint-working arrangement. Both approaches thus try to some extent to make a virtue out of necessity by taking advantage of the opportunities offered by their particular circumstances.

Fourthly, and related to this, the development of new strategies has largely been a matter for local action. Certainly there have been national policies developed and national resources put into new initiatives and I don't wish to suggest that these are unimportant. However, the reduction in union power at the national level by virtue of the ending of corporatist structures within the state and the legislative onslaught against union organisations, combined with the relative autonomy of the local branches and districts has meant that it is at the local level that change has often first occurred.

For regulation theory, a new mode of regulation will be established if a whole series of the new forms which are emerging in the transition combine in a mutually reinforcing way to stabilise the political and economic contradictions of the capitalist system. If this does happen it will be because certain forms and the relationships between them did eventually gain political predominance. Thus the struggle in which the unions are engaged is a struggle to make certain forms (perhaps those in the 'leading edge') predominant. Whether or not it is always

recognised by the individual participants, this represents a struggle over the future nature of public service provision in Britain.

The unions' responses, therefore, represent a series of attempts to redefine public service trade unionism and break with some of the 'orthodoxies' established during the 1970s. As I showed in Chapter Two, the public service unionism of the 1970s was forged during the development of the crisis of the Fordist mode of regulation and this resulted in the development of strategies and tactics appropriate to the defence of wages and jobs against quantitative reductions in the resources allocated for public services.

With the more qualitative changes involved in the Thatcherite attempt to find a way out of the crisis, this 'defensive militancy' became increasingly inappropriate. The neo-liberal version of 'post-Fordism' involves a radically different relationship between labour, capital and the state in the provision of public services. Privatisation and the deregulation of the labour market are key components. New forms of trade union action therefore are required to make the case not only for no reduction in the level of resources allocated to public service provision, but also for the principle of public provision itself. This implies addressing the relationship between users and producers at the local level, and trying to ensure independence from the local state which was increasingly losing its relative autonomy and consequently its ability to produce anything resembling a 'restructuring for labour'.

Thatcherite 'post-Fordism' might involve a frontal assault on the organisations of the labour movement, but it can never abolish labour relations as such. Labour is always involved in production and changes in the processes, organisational structure or role of production always have consequences for labour. Therefore, where trade unions at the local level find themselves in the right sort of contexts, the conditions exist for a challenging response to this restructuring. The processes of restructuring are thus rarely one sided, they always involve the activities of labour.

The necessary geographical differentiation of the trade unions' response thus implies a simultaneous differentiation in the process of restructuring. The establishment of a post-Fordism mode of regulation will be both contested and uneven. Although regulation theorists emphasise the central role of social and political struggle in determining the potential for and form of any resolution of crises in the mode of regulation, they do not, by and large consider the nature, causes and consequences of those struggles in detail. Regulation theory can explain why, once new institutional forms emerge, they are successful or otherwise in stabilising the pattern of accumulation. It is less clear when it comes to the reasons for the emergence of the new forms themselves, and all but silent on the geography of the processes involved.

In this report, I have tried in a limited way to show how these gaps might be filled. The attempts by trade unions to resist the neo-liberal path, and to develop qualitatively different forms of trade union action mean will influence the transition from Fordism. The 'public sector cities' and their 'spaces for labour' will be a key battle ground; some territory will be reclaimed, some successfully defended. The geographical outcome of these struggles will be part and parcel of any new stabilisation of the regime of accumulation, as will the institutional forms developed by the trade unions in the process. The geography of post-Fordism may look very different from that of its predecessor, but it will be a *political* geography, nonetheless.

9 Appendices

Appendix A: The Local Government Act 1988

The Act first identifies which institutions are covered by the rules. It then lists the seven services which are subject to CCT. These are refuse collection, building cleaning, other cleaning (mainly street cleaning), school and welfare catering, other catering (eg staff canteens), grounds maintenance and vehicle maintenance. The Act gives the Secretary of State the power to add more activities to the list at any time, and the management of sports facilities has since been added.

Under the Act, a local authority may not carry out these services in-house unless it abides by six conditions. The conditions are as follows:

1 The local authority must publish a notice in the local and trade press. The notice must state: (i) what work is involved, (ii) when and where a detailed specification can be inspected, (iii) that a copy of the specification may be obtained at a stated price, (iv) that those wishing to tender should notify the council, and (v) that the council will invite tenders to carry out the work.

2 The times, places and price for inspecting and obtaining the specification and tendering for the work must be 'reasonable', and the authority must actually make copies of the specification available. The specification must state when the contract will operate.

3 If any companies express interest, the council must invite at least three of them to tender for the work. If less than four companies are interested they must all be invited. The invitation must be issued between three and six months after the press notice was published.

4 The authority must prepare a written bid from its direct service organisation (DSO).

5 The authority must not act in an 'uncompetitive' or 'anti-competitive way'.

6 The direct service organisation must follow the specification.

There are three main exclusions to the legislation. The rules do not apply when the work is a minor part of the job of someone who mainly does other things, or when the work is done in an emergency, or if the value of the work is below a certain limit. The last exclusion (known as the *de minimis* rule) has the effect of exempting quite a number of small, mainly rural, authorities from CCT for at least some of the services.

The Act also insists that authorities set up separate trading accounts for the various services, and that they operate according to certain financial targets specified by the Secretary of State. In the case of building cleaning the target is to break even, while the other services have to produce a return on the capital they employ. This has two implications. The first is that since companies have no such compulsory targets, they can undercut local authorities by reducing their profit margins, at least for a period. The same option is not open to the DSO. The second implication is that financial criteria are accorded priority in assessing the work of DSOs, and that questions of employment practice, democratic control over services, social desirability and effectiveness are subordinated to those of financial efficiency.

Finally, local authorities are not allowed to take 'non-commercial' criteria into consideration when awarding the contracts. For example they may not insist that the workforce be paid at nationally-agreed wage rates, nor that it be unionised. Neither may they write equal opportunities clauses into the contract, nor decline to award a tender on the grounds that the company is South African owned.

When the CCT proposals were originally drawn up, the private contractors likely to bid for local authority contracts put pressure on the government not to flood the market. This resulted in a phased introduction. For grounds maintenance, each authority had to put at least 20% of its work out to tender by 1 January 1990, and a further 20% by the beginning of each year until 1 January

1994. (Note that these are minimum proportions. Some authorities have already tendered all their grounds maintenance work.) For all the other services tendering is being phased-in over a three year period. Local authorities have been randomly allocated to different groups. A timetable has been drawn up for each group, detailing which services must be put up to tender at which point. Contracts start at six month intervals. The first contracts began on 1 August 1989, the second ones on 1 January 1990, and so on until 1 January 1992.

Contracts are usually awarded for a four or five year period. This means that in many authorities as soon as the first phase of CCT has been completed in 1992 or 1993, it will be time to start all over again with second contracts for the services which were first to be put up to tender. It may also be significant that (with the exception of the final two phases of grounds maintenance contracts) all the initial contracts will have been awarded before the date by which the next general election must be held. Implementing the provisions of the Act involves a seven-stage procedure on the part of the authorities concerned. Each of the stages must be gone through for each six-monthly round or 'tranche' of contracts.

Stage one: prepare service profile Although it is not a requirement of the Act, this initial stage is important because it allows the local authority to make a comprehensive assessment of the service it currently provides, and thereby to identify where improvements can be made. To ensure that all views are considered, councils may wish to involve groups of users and trade union representatives in this review.

Stage two: prepare specification Nine months before contracts are due to start the local authority draws up a specification describing in detail the work involved. For example in the case of a refuse collection contract, the specification is likely to cover how often dustbins must be emptied, what type of bin should be used, where it should be collected from and so on. Some authorities have used the specification to raise the standards of service currently being provided.

Stage three: advertise for interested contractors About eight months before contracts start the authority must place advertisements in the local press and the trade press relating to the service in question as described above. Some authorities may then choose to vet the interested contractors and draw up a select list of approved companies.

Stage four: issue invitations to tender Between six and three months before contracts start the local authority must invite at least three contractors to tender for the work. If fewer than four are interested then all must be invited, however in this case the authority is allowed to inform a company that it does not reach the standards for select listing and qualification for tender. The companies concerned will then (if they choose) submit a bid to carry out the contract according to the specification.

Stage five: prepare and submit in-house bid At the same time, the council's own DSO must draw up its bid and submit it to the 'client side' of the authority.

Stage six: evaluate bids and award contract When the deadline for the receipt of bids has passed, the Chair of the relevant committee in the authority opens the tenders and evaluates them according to various criteria. These include the accuracy of the arithmetic, the ability of the contractor to carry out the specified work, whether the bid matches the specification and so on. The client department should also evaluate in detail the overall effect on the authority's finances of awarding the contract to an outside agency. Following evaluation, the contract is awarded. The authority does not have to award the contract to the lowest bidder, but it must have 'good reasons' for failing to do so.

Stage seven: monitor contract Finally the contract starts and the client department monitors the work to ensure that the specification is being met. This monitoring occurs whether the service is contracted-out, or retained in-house.

Each of these stages must be gone through for each six-monthly round or 'tranche' of contracts.

Appendix B: Case study selection criteria

(i) Political control

This refers not only to whether the council is Conservative or Labour, but also to the attitude of the elected members to the processes of restructuring. For example, some councils may be keen to involve the private sector heavily in the provision of services, while others will wish to defend the status quo. Still others may be opposed to privatisation, but seek to prevent it through the radical development of new forms of public service delivery.

(ii) Trade union - council relations

The quality of the relationship between local unions and the council is seen by unions at the national level as a key determinant of the unions' ability to influence the restructuring. This is because the national joint-union policy agreed between NUPE, NALGO, the TGWU and the GMB is that unions should cooperate with local councils in an effort to retain control over the production of services. There is a predictable tendency for differences in the quality of relations between councils and trade unions to reflect differences in political control, but there are many exceptions. Some Conservative-controlled councils have relatively good relations with their unions, while a number of Labour councils have bad ones.

(iii) Local labour movement traditions

This includes the local structure of trade unionism in the services concerned (that is, which unions organise which workers), as well as the local political culture of the labour movement. Is it dominated by full-time male workers from the refuse collection service? Or has it been influenced by demands from part-time dinner ladies for greater priority to be given to the issues which concern them? In some areas to be a member of a trade union is to participate in the locally dominant culture. In others it is the opposite. Thus the concept of a union's 'heartland' is associated not only with a concentration of membership, but also with a set of

cultural and political traditions.

(iv) Relations between unions

Relations between different unions at the local level are also important. This again is the view of national union policy-makers, who regard grass-roots cooperation as an important aspect of generating an effective response. In some areas unions work very well together, while in others relations are more strained. This is related to local union traditions, of course, but also to objective conditions. Thus one union might find itself in a position where the interests of its members conflict with the interests of the members of another union.

(v) Significance of public sector services in the local economy

The international recession in the early 1980s, and the effects of the policies of the Conservative government led to widespread deindustrialisation in the major industrial regions of the country, and in the inner cities. New growth industries have in general been concentrated away from these areas. The resulting concentrations of high levels of unemployment have a number of consequences. First, in areas of high unemployment, the threat of losing one's job is taken more seriously than in places where there is less difficulty in getting another. The implicit or explicit use of this threat by managers makes it easier for them to carry through unpopular processes of restructuring.

Second, the demand for local government services grows as social needs go unmet from other sources. Third, the significance of local government employment grows as the local private sector declines. As a consequence of these factors, a greater proportion of the population in these areas rely directly or indirectly on local government to meet their needs. Hence *how* councils provide services, and *what* services they provide varies widely from authority to authority. The impact of local government restructuring is thus relatively greater in areas of deindustrialisation than elsewhere. In turn this will influence both the nature of the unions' responses and the support they receive from users of the services.

(vi) The local labour market

Related processes are important in the specific area of competitive tendering for council contracts. The characteristics of the local labour market (its turnover, wage levels, and gender and racial segmentation) affect how easy it is for private contract service companies to meet tender specifications, and at what cost. Some areas may not have a large pool of 'unskilled', unorganised, casualised workers from which companies can recruit cleaners and catering staff.

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